

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**FIVE PRACTICAL STEPS FOR INCREASING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: A CASE
STUDY OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF VENICE, FLORIDA**

A Thesis Project Submitted to
Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

Christopher S. Cornette

March 10, 2017

Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary

Thesis Project Approval Sheet

MENTOR, Dr. Charlie N. Davidson
Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program
Liberty University
Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

READER, Dr. David Hirschman
Associate Professor of Religion
Liberty University

ABSTRACT

FIVE PRACTICAL STEPS FOR INCREASING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF VENICE, FL

Christopher S. Cornette

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017

Mentor: Dr. Charlie Davidson

The Bible implores Christians to commit themselves to one another for spiritual growth and personal accountability. This valuable mandate is best recognized in the New Testament as the local church. Many church leaders do not aggressively seize the opportunity to engage church attenders in making the church membership commitment. This thesis project will analyze and investigate the church membership growth processes of ten churches in three different denominations. This author will interview in depth the senior staff members as it relates to their effectiveness in moving attenders to church members compared with First Baptist Church of Venice. This church has doubled its membership in the past five years from three hundred to over seven hundred. This thesis will provide churches a five-step process to increase church membership.

DEDICATION

I am thankful to my wife, Devyn, who took over as mom and dad for Christopher, Harrison, and Lauren, while I was away working on this degree. Devyn, this doctoral degree is as much yours as it is mine. You are truly called to be a pastor's wife, and your relentless pursuit of Christlikeness has been an inspiration to me.

To my children, thank you for seeking Christ in your own lives. I am very proud of you and know Christ will shine brightly in your lives.

I am thankful to the pastor of my church family, Tom Hodge. If I lacked something in my spiritual walk, it was prayer, and you have taught me to pray. I would also like to thank the Ministry Staff Support Team and the wonderful membership of First Baptist Church of Venice. I am alive because of your prayers; all of you know what I mean. I would also like to thank Julie Crull for her tireless effort in keeping me on task.

I have been mentored by many great pastors, whether they realized it or not. Thank you, Rev. Jeff Cornette, Rev. Rush Hylton, Dr. Rick Byrd, Dr. Mac Brunson, Dr. Aron Willis, Rev. John Vernon, Rev. Joe McDowell, Dr. Joe Brown, Rev. Matt Phipps, and Rev. John Bernard. Each one you have helped me in ways only eternity will be able measure. I would also like to thank my mother for being a constant source of encouragement.

Ultimately, my thanks belong to my Lord. Thank you, Jesus, for saving me, using me in Your work, and giving me a home in heaven and a purpose on this earth.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Bob and Sarah have not attended church for many years. They both grew up attending church on Christmas and Easter, and they were married in a church building because that was what was expected of them. In the past, neither Bob nor Sarah had questions or an interest in spiritual things; however, the sudden death of Sarah's sister catapulted spiritual matters to the forefront of this couple's thoughts and conversations. On a warm Saturday evening in Florida, Bob and Sarah decided to attend church the next morning. After carefully reviewing a church website, the couple felt prepared for church the next morning. The website gave information such as to where to park, what to wear, the style of worship the church provided, and what Bible study groups were available by age. The church website also had a floor plan of the church buildings, so Bob and Sarah knew exactly where to go when they arrived. After parking in one of the church's designated visitor parking spots, Bob and Sarah were greeted by a friendly parking attendant and met a gentleman named Fred who helped them walk across the street to the church building. Lowell handed Bob and Sarah off to a warm smiling face named Rob, who directed them to a Bible study. After the Bible study a lady named Gail took Bob and Sarah to the church lobby. When Bob and Sarah entered the church lobby, several people were present as greeters and one of them, named Helen, handed Sarah a bulletin. A couple from the Bible study, Larry and Elizabeth, asked if the two couples could sit together. One of the Guest Services team members walked the two couples into the worship center and helped them find empty seats.

Fortunately for the Bob and Sarah, there were no surprises on that Sunday morning. The worship was traditional, just like the website indicated, and everyone was dressed business casual. The bulletin directed Bob and Sarah to several future church events where newcomers to

the church could get connected to members of the church. From the podium, the pastor asked all guests to fill out the tear-out form in the bulletin with their contact information and place it in the offering plate. Bob and Sarah smiled, feeling already at home at this church. Little did they know, the simple act of placing a tear-out information card in the offering plate would put into action a well-designed process that would lead them, separately, to be confronted with the need for a Savior and a deep abiding relationship with the Savior's followers.

The following Sunday Bob and Sarah wanted to attend the same church as the week before. That church "seemed like home." A member of the church, Kathleen, had already contacted Sarah by phone and e-mail. Bob also received a phone call from one of the Bible study leaders with an invitation to the class the next week and to play golf on Thursday. Even though this church met all expectations, Bob and Sarah did not want to "move too quickly." Bob and Sarah wanted to see if another church felt equally "at home." On Saturday night, Bob pulled up another church's website to see the service times, but all that was on the website was a picture of an outdated church picnic. Bob scoured the website and could not find the address of the church. Still, they decided to check out the church in person. Since Bob knew the general direction of the church, the next morning Bob and Sarah left thirty minutes early in case there was trouble finding the church or finding a parking spot. Not only was there not a parking lot, the church was also very difficult to locate because there was no proper signage. After they drove around the block for twenty minutes to find a parking spot, one became available. When Bob and Sarah entered the lobby an usher motioned, with noticeable frustration, for the two visitors to look at the sign reading "Be Quiet: Worship Service in Progress." The service had already started. Both Bob and Sarah wanted to leave, but they chose to stay since many people in the lobby were staring at the commotion caused by the usher as he told them in no uncertain terms to quiet down.

The only seats left in the worship center were down front. One of the ushers seemed annoyed about having to take Bob and Sarah into the worship center late but did so anyway. The entire church watched Bob and Sarah parade down the center aisle and sit in front of the choir, who were already standing and singing. This embarrassed Bob and Sarah immensely. When the service was over, the pastor of the church greeted Bob and Sarah at the back of the worship center. Cheerfully, the pastor of the church said, “I hope you come back soon.” That was the last Bob and Sarah heard from the church.

Bob and Sarah’s second church experience is, this writer is afraid, the church growth strategy for many churches in the United States. “I hope you come back soon” is not how the local church should treat potential members of the church and kingdom of God. There is a vast difference in how the first church and the second treated Bob and Sarah. Ultimately, it was at the first church that Bob and Sarah grew in the knowledge of Jesus, came to faith, and were baptized. This did not happen through a vague verbal expression of “hope.” Instead, it was brought about through a carefully designed plan of action to take these two guests from being far from God to being fully committed to Christ in a community of caring Christians. Even though each person mentioned in the previous story is fictitious, churches should do everything possible to make sure guests are well guided along the path to finding Christ and finding a church home.

Statement of the Problem and Background

This is not a thesis on church growth. The writer is not solely trying to increase the membership of any church or denomination in numbers only; rather, the writer is desirous of highlighting the need Christians have for committing to other Christians and the responsibility churches have for following up carefully on people who are outside of church membership. There is no way to find out an individual’s spiritual condition without continued conversations

with the person. After the church achieves an understanding of their spiritual condition, the church should continue the conversations until they make a decision for Christ and His church. A church's desire for this to happen will, by default, increase church membership. Also, the writer believes Christians committed to one another in the local church will see true spiritual growth and victory in the Christian life.

Church health can have many meanings. This research will illustrate that one sign of a healthy congregation is numerical growth. However, this research does not suggest that numerical growth is the only sign of a healthy church. Rather, the research suggests that the Spirit of God is daily at work convicting people of sin and the need of a Savior, and that Jesus Christ alone can meet that need. The conviction of sin and the realization Jesus is the only remedy through His incarnation is a sign of a healthy church. Echoing this truth, the Apostle Peter made a confession of faith, to which Jesus responded, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."¹ Every Christian must make the same confession Peter expressed. The local church is made up of individual Christians who are the mouthpieces of the Gospel, and together they are the visible sign of the unifying power of God and an earthly picture of heaven—diverse people united in praising God.

The numerical growth of local churches will finally lead to Apostle John's vision of the New Heaven and New Earth, where people from every generation and every location on earth gather in worship. Jesus Himself declared, "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and *then* comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are

¹ Matthew 16:18, unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New American Standard Bible (Anaheim: Lockman Foundation, 1998).

white for harvest.”² People are ready to be harvested into the kingdom of God, and the church, made up of individual Christians, are to be the harvesters. In another passage, Jesus declared that Christians would have power to spread the gospel when the Holy Spirit was sent: “but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”³

Jesus promised to build His church (grow it numerically), declared the fields (people) are ready to be harvested for His kingdom, and has given the church the Holy Spirit’s power. Then it should be surprising that the average membership of a Southern Baptist church in the year 2014 was three hundred people.⁴ If only half of the membership attended every Sunday, Southern Baptist churches would average 150 people each Sunday. The Wesleyan Church in the U.S. and Canada has similar attendance records as Southern Baptist churches in America, with “more than 1,700 local churches in the United States and Canada, with 144,00 members and an average of 227,000 in Sunday morning services.”⁵ These figures average to eighty-seven members for a Wesleyan church’s Sunday morning service. Likewise, the United Methodist Church has an average of 228 members for each church.⁶ Christians must realize that Americans are not opposed to churchgoing, but people are finding other things to do on Sunday where a sense of belonging can be found. “According to the Hartford Institute of Religion Research, more than 40 percent of Americans ‘say’ they go to church weekly. As it turns out, however, less than 20

² John 4:35.

³ Acts 1:8.

⁴ Southern Baptist Convention, *SBC Statistics by State Convention–2014* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Insights: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2015).

⁵ Federal Council of America, *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012).

⁶ The United Methodist Church, *2009–2014 Statistical Review* (Nashville, TN: General Council on Finance and Administration for the United Methodist Church, 2015).

percent are in church.”⁷ Furthermore, between 4,000 and 7,000 churches close their doors every year.⁸ Closing churches indicate new people are not being reached for Christ. Churches need to embrace the opportunity to assist people in finding a sense of belonging and a true community within the local church body.

The above statistics for the local church seem bleak without information to the contrary. The local church will never cease to exist, because of divine promises given to all Christ-followers from Jesus Himself. Jesus’ proclamation that He will build His church is found in the gospel record in Matthew 16:18 and should bring great hope to the hearts of those called to spread the gospel. Jesus will indeed build His church, and He will do so by amalgamating individual Christians into like-minded communities called local churches. Local churches not dedicated to sharing the gospel are susceptible to closing in the near future. This has proven particularly true for churches unwilling to evangelize the guests who walk into their pews each week. It seems obvious that interacting with first-time guests is an appropriate first step for a church wanting to renew a passion for evangelism.

The local church does not have to live in doubt and defeat. Since the children of God know Jesus will carry on His work, the local church must maintain a system to lead Christians toward a commitment to one another in fellowship. This is done through church membership. This commitment is biblical and honored by Christ. Jesus did not have a second plan for His message to be proclaimed. The only plan, clearly laid out in the Bible, is for the individual Christian to be committed to other Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and participate in the growth of the church according the Scripture.

⁷ William Wright, "Wright Way: Religious Attendance Down—Why?" Editorial, *Cleveland Daily Banner*, January 6, 2016. Print.

⁸ Ibid.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project was to determine a successful process for following up on first-time church guests, moving them from visitors to committed members, and to ascertain defining markers, if any, that enable a church to more effectively bring first-time guests into church membership. It must be emphasized that the focus on membership in this research was also a focus on salvation in Christ as the first step in committing to the body of Christ. This research compared the effectiveness of the strategy of First Baptist Church of Venice in Florida (hereinafter, also “First Baptist”) for transitioning first-time guests to church membership, with the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by nine other churches. Three of these churches were from the United Methodist denomination, three from the Wesleyan denomination, and three from the Southern Baptist Convention.

In this research paper, *commitment* and *membership* are sometimes used synonymously. *Commitment* means *membership* and *membership* means *commitment*. *Member* for this project is an individual identified as Christian, baptized according to the denomination’s process, and having joined a local church body. This member has then committed to the church gathering and to the other members of that church. Also, the word *member*, for the purpose of this paper, does not necessarily indicate someone who attends services, maintains a giving record and history of service to the church, practices spiritual disciplines, or actively shares their faith in Christ after membership has been granted. While these disciplines are surely signs of a Christian life, to narrow down the scope of this research project, time did not permit the discussion of spiritual growth criteria. The topic of accountability for members’ practice of spiritual disciplines would be better served in a research project on spiritual encouragement and church discipline. The benefit of this research, however, is that church membership opens a Christian to biblical church

discipline. It can be stated emphatically that without church membership there is no proper means of accountability.

The researcher's church is the First Baptist Church of Venice, Florida. First Baptist is a church of more than seven hundred members and is located in southern Florida, fifteen miles south of Sarasota, Florida. First Baptist is a complex church because it has members of many denominational backgrounds and age groups, as well as a large influx of northern visitors every winter. Some of the struggles the church has dealt with in the past involve new members bringing past church polity and preconceived expectations into First Baptist. For a new member, the church previously attended, especially if it was from another region of the United States, may be considered the "perfect church." The new members are thus apt to compare First Baptist against their previous church experiences, making it difficult for them to integrate into their new church home. With so many different denominations worshipping together in membership, it can be difficult for new members to understand the history of this Southern Baptist church and the Southern Baptist Convention. Correct theology—such as regarding the priesthood of the believer, eternal security, eschatology, and biblical evangelism—cannot be taken for granted by the leadership of the church in regards to new members.

Currently, First Baptist has seven full-time employees and twenty part-time employees. The church has many opportunities for outreach, including a children's sports ministry and Bible study opportunities throughout the week and on Sunday mornings. Additionally, the church hosts many different concerts, plays, and children's and youth outreach events each year. Recently, First Baptist Church of Venice has been focusing on building Bible study groups outside of the church's buildings. As of now, the church hosts Bible studies in homes, schools, restaurants, and retirement communities. The church has also purchased twenty acres off I-75 for a second

location. Even though the church does not have a building on the new property yet, the property is used quite often for outreach events and church fellowships.

The City of Venice is ninety-seven percent Caucasian. Most of the families in Venice would be considered upper-middle class. In 2014, the population of Venice was estimated to be 21,730. Venice could also be the oldest nonretirement city in the nation. Only 6.1% of the population is under eighteen years of age, and eighteen percent of those identifying as evangelical Protestant live in the Tampa, Florida area.⁹ The Tampa metro area is sixty miles from Venice, but even with this distance, there are plenty of opportunities for moving people to commitment in a church where membership matters. A hundred percent the population of Venice lives within eight miles of the church.

A Pew Research finding states, “As the year 2011 began on January 1, the oldest members of the Baby Boom generation celebrated their sixty-fifth birthday. In fact, on that day, today, and for every day for the next nineteen years, ten-thousand baby boomers will reach age sixty-five.”¹⁰ No one knows how many of these will retire and move to the Venice area, but one article states, “That influx of residents to Florida is expected to accelerate in 2015, with the state's growth machine reaching full speed again after the Great Recession. Florida's population is expected to grow by roughly two-hundred and eighty thousand people next year, more than double the net increase from just three years ago.”¹¹ First Baptist of Venice is poised to have substantial membership growth, and a guest assimilation process must be in place to assist each guest with making a commitment to Christ and to the church. The researcher does not believe the church's highest goal is to move first-time guests into membership; rather, the researcher

⁹ Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, *Baby Boomers Retire* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2010).

¹¹ Zack Anderson, "Florida's Growth Is Ramping Up," *Herald-Tribune*, December 31, 2014.

believes not everyone visiting a church is a born-again believer and therefore the first-time guest assimilation process is to be one where every guest is contacted and the personal salvation experience explored. After the relationship with Christ is verified and/or begins, then the guest should be offered church membership. The local churches in America and around the world have the mandate to take the gospel into the world, but the world includes strangers visiting worship gatherings each week as well. Amid the voices reminding the church of world missions, it is vital the church not forget about the guests God brings into the halls of the church building every week. The burden to share Christ by church members must be as strong for those first-time guests visiting the church each week as it is for those around the world or around the block. The church must share the gospel with the people God leads to walk through the doors of the church building.

Statement of Limitations

The researcher aimed to gain a general understanding of first-time guest follow-up systems for nine churches and how the system correlates with the guests' later commitment to church membership. The researcher, of the Southern Baptist denomination, initially considered only sampling Southern Baptist churches, but determined that an ecclesologically broader investigation would bring greater insight into the successes of differing church systems in moving people to membership. There is also a variation in the geographic locations of the churches surveyed. The research included churches in the south, northeast, and the southwest regions of Florida.

In addition, this study did not delve into the recent trends of the “nones.” Pew Research comments regarding the “nones” that “Religiously unaffiliated people have been growing as a share of all Americans for some time. Pew Research Center’s massive 2014 Religious Landscape

Study makes clear just how quickly this is happening, and shows that the trend is occurring within a variety of demographic groups across genders, generations and racial and ethnic groups, to name a few. Religious ‘nones,’ a shorthand we use to refer to people who self-identify as atheists or agnostics, as well as those who say their religion is ‘nothing in particular’ now make up roughly 23% of the U.S. adult population.”¹² As the World War II generation passes, it seems that commitment to religious and civic organizations is passing as well. As Robert D. Putnam writes, “the civic minded World War II generation was, as it’s on John F. Kennedy proclaimed at his inauguration, picking up the torch of leadership not only in the nation’s highest office, but in the cities and towns across the land.”¹³ Understanding this, the children of the World War II generation are more likely to join an organization than later generations. Therefore, the population in Venice, Florida, will be more likely to join a church than cities with a younger population (the “nones”).

Another limitation is that many factors out of an individual’s control determine whether a church member can continue attending a local worship gathering. A few of these are the church’s seating capacity, parking capacity, and whether the church has places for the member to attend a Bible study. Not all churches that grow in membership grow in attendance because of these limitations. This research did not investigate the gap between church membership numbers and church attendance numbers.

An additional limitation of the study regards the very nature of church membership. Even though the church congregation can decide what constitutes a “church member,” so can the

¹² Pew Research Center, *A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones’* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

¹³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 17.

pastoral staff, the church committee, and each individual member. There can be implicit and explicit definitions within each church. Putnam writes, “Other observers, such as E. Brooks Holyfield, argue that the meaning of church membership has become less stringent overtime and concludes that from the 17th century through the 20th, participation in congregations has probably remained relatively constant. For the most of the past 300 years, from 35 to 40% of the population has probably participated in congregations with some degree of regularity.”¹⁴ He adds, “In either case, one reason for the resilience is that religion in America (unlike in most other advanced western nations) has been pluralistic and constantly evolving, expressed in a kaleidoscope series of revivals and awakenings rather than a single state religion that could become ossified.”¹⁵ America is diverse in religious opinions based on denominations, backgrounds, parental influences, and geographic locations. This diversity means there are also denominations that do not even practice “church membership.”

Simply stated, a limitation is also found in the population growth surrounding each church. The model church has a forecasted positive census growth. The researcher’s church is the First Baptist Church of Venice, Florida. First Baptist is a church of more than seven hundred members and is located in southern Florida, fifteen miles south of Sarasota, Florida. First Baptist is a complex church because it has members of many denominational backgrounds and age groups, as well as a large influx of northern visitors every winter. Some of the struggles the church has dealt with in the past involve new members bringing past church polity and preconceived expectations into First Baptist. For a new member, the church previously attended, especially if it was from another region of the United States, may be considered the “perfect

¹⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 65–66.

¹⁵ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 6.

church.” The new members are thus apt to compare First Baptist against their previous church experiences, making it difficult for them to integrate into their new church home. With so many different denominations worshipping together in membership, it can be difficult for new members to understand the history of this Southern Baptist church and the Southern Baptist Convention. Correct theology—such as regarding the priesthood of the believer, eternal security, eschatology, and biblical evangelism—cannot be taken for granted by the leadership of the church in regards to new members.

Another limitation of the study is how individual church’s staff the church based on attendance and membership. Currently, First Baptist has seven full-time employees and twenty part-time employees. The church has many opportunities for outreach, including a children’s sports ministry and Bible study opportunities throughout the week and on Sunday mornings. Additionally, the church hosts many different concerts, plays, and children’s and youth outreach events each year. Recently, First Baptist Church of Venice has been focusing on building Bible study groups outside of the church’s buildings. As of now, the church hosts Bible studies in homes, schools, restaurants, and retirement communities. The church has also purchased twenty acres off I-75 for a second location. Even though the church does not have a building on the new property yet, the property is used quite often for outreach events and church fellowships.

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¹⁶ Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

from Venice, but even with this distance, there are plenty of opportunities for moving people to commitment in a church where membership matters. A hundred percent the population of Venice lives within eight miles of the church.

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¹⁷ Pew Research Center, *Baby Boomers Retire* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2010).

¹⁸ Zack Anderson, "Florida's Growth Is Ramping Up," *Herald-Tribune*, December 31, 2014.

week. The burden to share Christ by church members must be as strong for those first-time guests visiting the church each week as it is for those around the world or around the block. The church must share the gospel with the people God leads to walk through the doors of the church building.

A final potential limitation is the books referenced regarding church growth and church growth systems. Although each book has great value, the data used in older studies are not as relevant today since cultural paradigms have changed significantly in the last thirty years.

Theoretical Basis

Church membership is biblical.¹⁹ The commitment Christians make to one another when they join the local church should not be undervalued. John Piper believes church membership is a New Testament expectation for all believers and that all should take responsibility to discipline those within the church family that are causing shame on the name of Christ and that as Christians there should be a desire for this type of accountability.²⁰ Furthermore Piper adds, that it is Scriptural that this accountability structure is designed locally so that every believer can be part of a group of elders that will watch over the lifestyle of each Christian.²¹ Members of the church, when acting biblically, as one body should be more committed to one another than to any other organization on earth. Typically, people do not have issues with joining groups. For instance, there are book clubs, exercise clubs, and library memberships, and people carry grocery store and drug store discount cards proudly on their key chains. Popular culture indicates a desire to belong to something worthy of belonging to or believing in, something from which a desirable

¹⁹ Romans 12:4-5.

²⁰ John Piper, "How Important Is Church Membership?" (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, July 13, 2008).

²¹ Piper, "How Important Is Church Membership?"

benefit can be derived from one's membership. There is no greater benefit than one that benefits the eternal soul, belonging to the body of Christ.

As church attenders become more and more interested in the local church, visiting more often and becoming involved in more ministries and activities, the members of that church should never lose sight that the task is to call other individuals to commitment to Christ and to the work of the church. Ronald Edwin Hughes writes, "The church, when it is truly acting as the body of Christ, is concerned about each member and determined to seek the health of each one. It is the duty of the church to do so."²² If an individual makes no commitment to other believers, then there is no system in place to hold one another accountable to the Christian life and to the doctrines found in the Scripture.

The first reason a Christian should be a member of the local church is for accountability in the Christian walk. A church that fully understands membership understands that membership encourages an environment where believers are free to examine the lives of other believers in a gentle manner for areas where compromise may be occurring. The spirit of a healthy church member desires accountability in the deepest recesses of the heart. Church membership does not involve one group of people judging another, but an individual embracing the benefit of being held accountable in walking with the Lord.

The accountability that Christians should have for one another's soul should be a central part of church membership. This, according to the Book of Hebrews, is central to the pastors' task as well: "After the author of Hebrews instructs readers to obey church leaders and submit to the authority the leaders have, the Biblical writer adds, 'For they keep watch over your souls as

²² Ronald Edwin Hughes, "Shepherding the Flock: C.A.R.E.-A Model for Pastoral Ministry" (DMin thesis, Liberty University, 2015).

those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”²³ If the shepherd has no sheep that have committed to being led, who is the author of Hebrews asking the pastor to shepherd? How could a pastor approach a non-church member for his sinful behavior if he has never committed to be part of the pastor’s flock? Could the pastor ask an individual to live by a certain set of guidelines she has never agreed to live by? The answer to these questions is a definite “no.” Merkle writes, “Church discipline, like church membership, is a biblical concept and important to the health of a church. But church discipline cannot be properly carried out if the church does not have an official membership role.”²⁴ The more that members of a local church hold one another accountable to lives pleasing to Christ, the more the world will see the holiness of Christ and the need for salvation and forgiveness. Once these needs are met spiritually, the new Christian will sense a need for committing to the local church.

Jesus is very clear when he commands the Church to take the gospel into the entire world. After Jesus told the parable of the sower in Mark 4, the disciples approached Jesus and asked Him to clarify the meaning of the story. Jesus responded, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?” In their commentary, Walvoord and Zuck explain Jesus’ response this way: “Two questions here emphasize the importance of the soils parable. Yes, Jesus’ disciples did not understand (*oidate*, intuitively comprehend) it’s meaning, then they would not understand (*gnosethe*, comprehend by experience) any of the kingdom parables”²⁵ Another way of stating what Jesus said is, ‘If you cannot put into practice the discipline of

²³ John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 37.

²⁴ Ibid. 40.

²⁵ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scripture by Dallas Seminary Faculty* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 118.

sharing faith in Me to the lost people around you, I will by no means allow the blessings of the other parables to impact you through blessings. I have put My followers on this earth to share the gospel. I cannot help My followers in other spiritual dimensions unless My followers obey Me by sharing the Gospel.’ ” Jesus was saying that Christians will not have a profound experience with other spiritual truths without actively sowing the seeds of the gospel.

The early church understood the mission of the individual Christian to take the gospel to the world in daily affairs, but they also understood certain men were called to the gospel ministry and should be compensated fully as a full-time job. In today’s Christian culture, this calling would be identified as full-time Christian ministry. Many churches look to full-time Christian ministers to accomplish the Great Commission; however, the Great Commission was given to all believers in Christ. One researcher stated, “As I looked at the deaths of 14 churches, I saw a common pattern. Obedience to the great commission faded; it usually faded gradually. It’s not like one day the church was sending out dozens of members in the community and it suddenly stopped. Instead the decline in the outward focus was gradual, almost imperceptibly gradual.”²⁶ The key to a vibrant, influential church is the commitment the individual Christians have to one another. Thom Rainer states, regarding his research on dying churches and why the members were not seeing the church grow as in yesteryear, “They just wanted it to happen. Without prayer. Without sacrifice. Without hard work.”²⁷ If church membership were not important, there would be no need for individual Christians’ commitment to being in the habit of discipling and creating an environment for the church of tomorrow to be ready to carry out the ministry, because there

²⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Your Church Alive* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2014), 42.

²⁷ Ibid. 44.

would be no promise that the younger generation would not simply pick up and move on without any feeling of obligation.

Even though the Apostle Paul was a bi-vocational pastor, this Christian evangelist went on mission after being set aside by the local church. Paul realized the local church was the mouthpiece of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”²⁸

This biblical authority from the church was recognized by Paul and Barnabas, as they too followed the same process when they founded a church. “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”²⁹ It is full-time pastors, part-time and bi-vocational pastors, and the church laity that are responsible for helping others carry on the mission and the work of the local church. This mission is to both preach the gospel and disciple Christians as they grow in their love of Christ and one another. This author believes this is best accomplished when one Christian looks at another and declares, “I am committed to the individuals in this church, and I want membership.”

The Christian commitment to one another and to the great need Christians have to be encouraged by the church is exemplified John 21, in Jesus’ discussion with Peter regarding his denial of Christ. Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. When Peter responded positively Jesus challenged him two more times regarding the depth of his love. Jesus prophesied that Peter would lose his life because of Jesus and Jesus’ message. Peter did not hesitate to extend his life for the cause of the gospel. This is proven by his following Jesus to the point of crucifixion.³⁰

²⁸ Acts 13:1–3.

²⁹ Acts 14:23.

³⁰ John 21.

One of the problems the earliest followers of Jesus faced was the compromise of those called to be committed to one another. Had Peter not stayed with the “church” (the assembly of Christ-followers), he would not have been in the right place to be encouraged back into the fold of Christ. Jesus understood that Peter would be with those he was committed to. The group of followers were all together, discussing the mysteries of Jesus’ ministry and what was taught. Jesus then appeared to encourage Peter in the gospel.

Paul also understood what Peter learned when he wrote to the church in Thessalonica, “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.”³¹ There will indeed be times in the Christian walk when the individual believer will have a profound need to be encouraged by other Christians. This need may arise because of temptation, physical illness, tragic events, or simply the daily grind of Western culture. The church body plays the third most important role in encouraging the Christian, after the Holy Spirit and the Bible. Society praises those who live in an individualistic way, without the help of others, but God’s kingdom is different. According to the writer of Hebrews, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”³² The church gathering is a required commandment from Christ and should be treated as holy; Christians should make a commitment to attend church gathering as one of the highest priorities.

Statement of Methodology

Chapter one of this thesis outlines the research problem so the reader understands the importance of and the biblical mandate to encourage Christians to commit to other Christians in

³¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

³² Hebrews 10:24–25 (emphasis added).

what many would identify as church membership. The statement of limitations was also listed, with special care to explain what topics the research did and did not address. This thesis did not set out to research new member assimilation in the local church in terms of attendance, small groups, service, etc., but in terms of church membership commitment.

From there, chapter one proceeds to discuss the theoretical basis, the scriptural support for the foundation of the church growth model and the benefits one receives and gives for making the church membership commitment. A survey of passages from the Scripture helped determine the biblical basis for church membership. Without such scriptural basis for church membership, there is a considerable hazard for demanding people do what Jesus did not command. If committing to a group of other Christians is indeed biblical, the researcher has the authority to find ways to improve the church's effectiveness in helping Christians make the commitment in assisting others to join a local church. It is also the researcher's goal to help churches and church leaders influence people to make this commitment because of the biblical mandate.

Chapter one also contains a review of literature to determine what has already been researched and revealed by other authors in moving first-time guests to church membership, after which the chapter explains the historical and biblical mandate and benefits of church membership. Church membership, chapter one argued, is not a cultural mandate but the intention of God when He designed the church. This research believes that churches with a fully functioning "guest to membership" system will have a higher rate of baptisms and more new members than other churches. If church membership does nothing more than produce a greater number of new Christians, then church membership growth should be pursued by every New Testament Church.

Chapter two reviews and summarizes the research conducted. The researcher created a research instrument to determine the effectiveness of ten churches in bringing first-time guests to church membership. Other data were collected through books, journals, and other thesis papers to assist in determining positive and negative outcomes on this topic. The research instrument, a survey, was distributed to twenty ministers throughout eastern United States, who represented three different denominations. The goal of the survey was to determine which churches or systems brought about most members in a five-year period. The surveys were completed through Survey Monkey questionnaires and staff member interviews. The sample included the senior pastor and one staff member from each church. The researcher chose to interview a staff member to explore whether the senior pastors' perceived system of follow-up on first-time guests was in fact implemented or only perceived to be so. It was the goal of this research to determine processes that influence the most people to make a commitment to the local church. Chapter two revealed the findings of the research.

Chapter three discusses the characteristics and results of the surveyed churches and identified the hallmarks of those churches' first-time guest follow-up systems with detail. In this discussion, chapter three reported statistics regarding new members, baptisms, and staff and lay leadership responsibilities in connecting with first-time guests and moving them to church membership. The surveyed churches were compared to the model church in these areas.

Chapter four elaborates on a suggested guest-follow-up system and offered practical advice in initiating a church growth initiative that can be implemented in any size church, denomination, or geographic location. The chapter focuses on a set of principles proven to increase church membership.

Chapter five will explain to the reader opportunities for further research detailing what areas could be researched to increase the church's avenues for greater church growth in the future.

Review of Literature

A review of literature illustrates the importance of a well-defined first-time guest to church member process. The literature review for this thesis included books, magazines, research journals, the Bible, a pastoral questionnaire, a staff member questionnaire, and census data from the federal government. The review covered demographic information, a biblical mandate to move people to church membership, other processes of first-time guest assimilation into the church body, and the commitment and success rate of the research churches in moving people to membership.

An effective follow-up system is beneficial especially for those visiting who do not have a positive view of the church. Many times, visitors have been wounded spiritually, financially, or emotionally in a church. It is vital that every church follow up on each first-time guest to heal some of this pain. The book *ReChurch* explains the need for people to expect the right response to reentering the church world.³³ It is a highly recommended source for pastors and church staff to read as it explains what many people are thinking and feeling when beckoned into the door of the church. Even though the book focuses on the "hurt" church member, the church body will do well to understand what the church guest may be feeling and how the individual approaches relationships in the church.

³³ Stephen Mansfield, *ReChurch: Healing Your Way Back to the People of God* (Barna Books: Carol Stream, IL., 2010).

In the book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*, Thom Rainer explains that a church in decline has no idea it is in decline because the decline happens over time.³⁴ If the members came in on a Sunday and ninety percent of the membership had moved to another church at one time, the church members would immediately begin to make changes; however, this scenario rarely happens. Church membership declines over long periods of time. Therefore, those who loved the church but never recognized the church was failing at fulfilling the Great Commission would be moved to action if the future could be flashed for all to see.

This thesis writer assumes that vibrant, healthy, churches want new people to join their membership. Although declining churches often do not understand the cause of its ailment, the reasons are made plain if one searched the Scripture for the definition of a healthy church. As Thom Rainer explains, “Often the decline is in the physical facilities, but it is much more than that. The decline is in the vibrant ministries that once existed. The decline is in the prayer lives of the members who remain. The decline is in the outward focus of the church. The decline is in the connection with the community. The decline is in the hopes and dreams of those who remain. The decline is everywhere in the church, but many don’t see it.”³⁵ This thesis is intended to help the local church turn hopeful aspirations of growing the church membership by growing the commitment Christians have toward intentionally moving unbelievers and the uncommitted toward engaging the gospel as one body. The purpose of joining the church is committing to other Christians in fulfilling the Great Commission. This work shows what happens to churches that focus on outsiders with the intention of turning them to insiders who long for and reach out

³⁴ Rainer, *Autopsy of a Dead Church*, 13.

³⁵ Rainer, *Autopsy of a Dead Church*, 13.

to other outsiders. When the church reaches out to those who are interested in the message of Christ, the church will not decline.

Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer explain how the church should revitalize to make inroads to the people in the community. They believe the church must change the way it views success. The “scorecard,” as Stetzer and Rainer put it, needs to be redefined.³⁶ The new “scorecard” involves members sharing the gospel, spending time in prayer and Bible reading, and serving and making disciples through intentional relationships in a systematic fashion. These are spiritual disciplines and the goal of the Christian life. The writers say, “We have both served as pastors and professors. From a ministerial perspective, we wrestled with the desire to see the church grow numerically and in maturity at equal levels. From an academic perspective, we endeavor to teach ministerial students the value assigned to each.”³⁷ There is value in adding to the number of Christians in any given church family. Rainer and Stetzer add this valuable nugget of truth about why committing to the local church is important: “The Bible defines what community is supposed to look like and how we as God’s people are supposed to commit to and walk in relationship with one another.”³⁸

A church cannot compromise the central tenets of the Christian faith to grow numerically. Churches attempting to make a difference in the kingdom of God use the Scripture as the guide for faith and practice. Tom Rainer’s *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* discusses this topic. Rainer believes a great church is great because it is doing great work for the kingdom and not straying from the central doctrines of the Christian faith in order to add

³⁶ Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer. *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2010), 25.

³⁷ Ibid., 25.

³⁸ Ibid., 173.

members.³⁹ A church ceases to be a church when the message it teaches is contrary to the Word of God, changes the Word of God even if only slightly, or fails to teach the entire counsel of God in order to make it palatable to or inclusive of everyone. Often these practices are enacted to grow attendance and membership. Conversely, a great work is defined as a church centrally grounded in the goal of Great Commission fulfillment. The breakout leader is a humble leader attempting to move the congregation to effectively fulfill Jesus' command for the church to be guided by one Spirit, as one in mission in tandem to one another and the Holy Spirit. Being one in Spirit assumes people are committed to Christ's church and to Christ's people. The church gathering, no matter how small or large, is filled with people gathering to prepare to make disciples for the Lord.

The thesis project is in large part an argument for why Christians should join a local church and how the church can assist in this goal. The answer to these questions could revolutionize kingdom growth in the United States. It is obvious that there is, at the heart of this question, a spiritual answer. Each local church must decide if it is committed to reaching out as the hands and feet of Christ. Individuals could have a deep desire to connect with the body of believers but have no outlet to do so because a local church has become inwardly focused or may have no system to welcome newcomers. Edward A. Rauff's book, *Why People Join the Church*, describes what outsiders expressed as the reasons for joining or rejoining the church. Rauff understands that each church has a clear and concise definition of what it means to be a "member" and he concedes that this process is different for each church. Rauff shares research insights churches have for differing processes for church membership, but it is clear that each church has

³⁹ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 191.

a unique process and, whether it is effective or not, the process is perfectly designed to get the results it is in fact getting.⁴⁰ If a church has no new members, then the system is designed to repeat the results next year. If the church has fifty new members, then the process, left alone, is likely to get similar results the following year.

Since membership means Christians committed to one another for spiritual growth and evangelism, then membership matters to God. In *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation*, Chuck Lawless writes, “Studies have shown that on average, attenders come to a church for 18 months before they join. None of our survey respondents spoke in terms of that length of time, but some said they had a tender soul and decided quickly to join a church.”⁴¹ The importance of this book to the research was the insight that people take longer to join the church, according to Lawless, than in previous generations, and patience is the key to encouraging people to commit to any given church.⁴² This is not to say the membership commitment must take longer than generations past, but the average person may take longer. The book is also a much-needed reminder that people need to know what a church stands for in the community and in the kingdom of God. Visitors and guests need to see if the church meets the standards of biblical orthodoxy and orthopraxy. When these two line up, individuals are more likely to join more quickly. There should never be a system in place to manipulate people into joining a church. Guests need to know newcomers are welcome to attend as long as needed to decide regarding church membership; however, churches need to also offer plenty of opportunities for guests to become members when ready to do so. Unnecessary

⁴⁰ Edward A. Rauff, *Why People Join the Church: An Exploration Study* (Washington, DC: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 10.

⁴¹ Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 95.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95–96.

obstacles can make church visitors feel unwelcome and can hinder them from using their spiritual gifts in the church prior to full membership. If a church, knowingly or unknowingly, discourages a Christian from exercising the gift God has given through the Holy Spirit, this is a lost opportunity and will have eternal repercussions.

Pastors must take the label of “church member” with great seriousness. Human nature and cultural norms assume a church member is also a Christian; however, Jesus states clearly that not all who calls Him, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of God.⁴³ The task of the shepherd is to teach, correct, and guide the sheep placed under the individual shepherd’s care with a gentle and loving spirit as the Bible demands. Pastors should never try to grow the flock with the unregenerate. At a minimum, church membership is for those that have repented of sin, been called to faith in Christ, and have been baptized publicly to identify with Christ. As will be discussed in a later chapter, the church member should be clear on conversion and the church body should have an opportunity, using some part of the new member process, to verify the genuineness of the conversion of the new member and ensure the member meets the church qualifications for membership. Usually, the church gives this process to a well-trained group of volunteers.

John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle describe the seriousness of this process in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*.⁴⁴ The text is on church discipline, but it can be gleaned also from the book that the Bible gives pastors a warning of personal accountability for the souls entrusted to the pastor’s local church. Church membership is a sacred rite and must be dealt with through much prayer, discussion, and

⁴³ Matthew 7:21.

⁴⁴ John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle, *Those Who Must Give An Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012).

examination. The book underscores the importance of a well-thought-out and well-executed process for church membership: “Pastors today cannot assume that Christians understand either church membership or its importance. In fact, many pastors seem to have forgotten anything more than the most pragmatic arguments for it . . . it would not nearly be unwise to neglect it; such neglect what itself be soon and would lead others into sin.”⁴⁵

In an interview, Norm Funk asked John Piper’s thoughts on people who say, “I will not leave Jesus, but I’m done with the church.”⁴⁶ Dr. Piper takes what Jesus states in the Bible and responds with other questions and Scripture. The logic used to rebut this statement is an excellence response to this paradigm. Piper argues that Jesus told His followers to keep His word, and the church was His idea. Piper goes on to explain that Jesus used Paul to set up a structure in the church as well. The church is designed by Christ with Christ as the head, pastors as under-shepherds (administrators), and the membership (body) to be the ministers.⁴⁷ For an individual to state, “I love Jesus,” but neglect spending time with His bride is to choose Jesus over His Word. This is incompatible in the eyes of God.

It seems the most important question regarding church membership is whether or not church membership has any credibility from a biblical perspective. The phrase “church membership” is not found in the Bible; however, in multiple places authors of Scripture command a commitment to one another among Christians. John Piper makes a grand case for church membership in his sermon, “How Important Is Church Membership?”⁴⁸ Dr. Piper stresses that church membership should have certain criteria but the church should welcome the Christian

⁴⁵ Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 91.

⁴⁶ John Piper, “I Will Not Leave Jesus—But I’m Done with the Church,” interview by Norm Funk, Westside Church, December 16, 2015.

⁴⁷ Piper, “I Will Not Leave Jesus—But I’m Done with the Church,”

⁴⁸ Piper, “How Important Is Church Membership.”

believer without reservation. According to Piper, the potential new church member should be put through a process of church membership, which is outlined in the New Testament. Many Christians and churches fail to even contact potential new members even after the guests walk through the doors into the church and give their contact information. Again, the local church cannot sit idly by while first-time guests parade in and out of the assembly week after week and hope the guest comes back next week.

Once again, the challenge of church discipline surfaces when the subject of church membership arises. The writer concedes that the Bible is the one infallible source when church discipline and church membership is discussed. The writer also concedes that it behooves all believers to seek the wisdom of academics and the collective knowledge of the study and exegesis of the topic. The work of Al Mohler, of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary qualifies as such. Dr. Mohler writes, “The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.”⁴⁹ For Christians to hold to the truths found in the Scripture regarding submitting to one another, church discipline, training and fulfilling the Great Commission, the individual church members must be bound together by something greater than the whim of an individual to attend or not to attend the gathering of believers.

Scripture Passages

⁵²Albert Mohler: *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, General Editor. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998).

Many Scripture references indicate that the task of the Christian is to grow the kingdom of God by preaching and teaching all that Jesus commanded. Preachers and teachers should go into the world to build the universal church of Christ but also the local church of Christ. This is the case in Paul's admonition in the letter to the Roman church. Paul wrote the Christians in Rome, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!'"⁵⁰ Paul reminds Christ-followers that the local church is the one sending missionaries, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The local church has authority and the final say in the lives of its members, and the members should be the sending force behind the people called to missions or ministry. This "sending" in no way means only those called to serve Christ in full-time ministry. The church should be encouraging all Christians to use the gifts God has given in all tasks. The person sweeping the floor is as called to use the gift of service as the pastor with the gift of preaching or the missionary to an Islamic country with the gift of evangelism. Every member serving should be under the authority of the leadership of the local church.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminded Christians that every believer received a benefit for submitting to the leaders of the local church. In chapter thirteen of the letter, the author wrote, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."⁵¹ If not submitting to the church is unprofitable, a reader could surmise

⁵⁰ Romans 10:14-15.

⁵¹ Hebrews 13:17.

that submitting to the leadership of the church is profitable for the Christian. In the same chapter, but in verse seven, the writer admonished, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.” The Christians in the region where this letter was sent needed to imitate the faith of the leaders of the local church. It is important for the church to know who the leader is and who the members are. The leader is the pastor and is to teach the less spiritually mature the way of the faith so weaker brothers and sisters can eventually lead other Christians. This is done when believers are connected and committed to one another in the faith of Christ through church membership.

Finally, the writer of Hebrews indicates a desire for the readers to greet the leaders of the church in the area where the letter was written. He wrote, “Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.”⁵² Christians are never to be alone when there is an opportunity to worship with other Christians. The church is to gather, worship, be trained, encourage, pray, and depart for the work of missions as a church family committed to one another. God testifies to in the Scripture that there are to be leaders in this work and the followers are to submit and be committed to the church leadership.

In Acts, Luke made this observation regarding the life of the Apostle Paul, “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them”⁵³ Paul recognized the local church pastors and knew these men were the ones who would give an account to the Great Shepherd regarding the state of the flock of God. Paul added, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has

⁵² Hebrews 13:24.

⁵³ Acts 20:17.

made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that He purchased with His own blood.”⁵⁴

The reference is the universal church, but the specific reference is the local gathering of believers.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth that has been titled I Corinthians. In this letter, Paul expressed this, “Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors.”⁵⁵

The leaders are to lead the congregation in expanding the church to the point where other churches are formed through the community. This grows individual faith and teaches the church member a core tenant of the Christian life, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”⁵⁶ A great benefit of being a church member is the opportunities to sacrifice personal preferences for the preferences of others.

In keeping with the theme of showing preference for another church member, the Apostle Peter, one of Jesus closest disciples, writes, “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.”⁵⁷ Christians are tempted to assume that Peter is referring to how believers should treat others in the world; however, the audience was a church and Peter was insisting the individual church member will experience hurt, disappointment, and even evil within the body of Christ. Peter wants each Christian within this committed group known as the church to recognize the

⁵⁴ Acts 20:28.

⁵⁵ I Corinthians 16:15-16.

⁵⁶ Philippians 2:3.

⁵⁷ 1 Peter 3:8–9.

church is like a family and families should be committed to one another no matter what unforeseen circumstances that may arise. This writer doubts a person will stick with another person through horrendous circumstances if one person will not even make a commitment to serve Christ with the other person by agreeing to a few Biblical mandates and premises.

No verse can best describe the need for believers to commit to one another than the one found in Hebrews, "...not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."⁵⁸ Theologians can debate about church membership qualifications or even what is required for membership, but this verse proves there is at least one qualification, the assembling together of the church of Jesus Christ in a local setting. This verse proves there were Christians that had a set standard and met locally.

Another passage in the letter to the Hebrews implies Christians are to meet on a regular basis. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."⁵⁹ The early Jewish Christians were recorded as meeting daily for encouragement. This admonition may be impossible to heed in American culture unless the church is defined as simply more than one Christian meeting together for worship. When this definition is used, the passage is applicable. The commitment of church membership is defined here as well. Christians should meet for encouragement regularly.

⁵⁸ Hebrews 10:25.

⁵⁹ Hebrews 3:12-13

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Roman Christians, insists the church universal is one body, but Paul implies later in the letter that the body must function locally. Since Paul was writing to a local church, the reader can surmise that the body is no good if the parts are spread throughout the world. Each local congregation functions as a single body doing the work of Christ. This work is for the common good in the region, and ultimately the universal body spreads the gospel to the world. Each church member must be committed to doing the part God has required for that individual Christian to accomplish. This is the commitment of church membership to the body. Paul writes in his letter to the Roman Christians, “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”⁶⁰

Within the members of the local church is where the message of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension was first introduced to the world, through the preaching of the earliest disciples of Jesus. Luke records, “The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.”⁶¹ The passage suggests two groups of Christians were meeting in two separate cities, both referred to as the church. The meetings were intended to worship the risen Lord, train believers to share the gospel, and send out missionaries to spread the newfound hope of forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ. An individual believer needs the church to help the spiritual growth process personally in at least these ways. It is the purpose of the church to bring new believers into the fold of the local congregation to later send the new members out to make other disciples. Again, this will not happen effectively without believers committing to one another.

⁶⁰ Romans 12:4-5.

⁶¹ Acts 11:22.

It is found in at least one other place in the Book of Acts the need for every Christian to be part of a local church. The book of Acts states the need the church body has for the spiritual input of each Christian in regards to the leadership of the church, “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”⁶² God hears the prayers of His people, and the local church needs members praying as the need arises for new leadership. Christians are to pray and help select the leaders of the local church. How could the church choose pastors, deacons, and elders without the input from the Holy Spirit that resides in each Christian? The ministry of the Holy Spirit leads the church in every decision, and it is the church member’s responsibility to encourage other church members to get involved and stay involved in the life of the church.

The two biblical references that are the strongest to this writer regarding the intentional growth of the local church as it relates to membership are both found in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 4:13, as referenced earlier in this work, Jesus exclaims that sharing the gospel, thereby growing the local church, is the most basic responsibility of the people who claim the name of Christ. Jesus told the disciples that if they could not comprehend the parable of the sower, they would be unable to experience the other blessings of ministry and life Jesus would reveal. The record of Jesus’ earthly ministry ends in the Book of Mark with Him commanding the disciples to make disciples by preaching the good news to those needing to hear what God has done for the world. Mark records, “So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.”⁶³

⁶² Acts 14:23.

⁶³ Mark 16:19-20.

Ultimately, the responsibility to build the church belongs in the hands of Jesus Christ. Jesus said in Matthew's gospel account, "I will build My church."⁶⁴ The members of the church are responsible for planting gospel seeds and not doing anything to stop the growth of the church. Christians can find church membership too difficult and can also make church membership too easy. It seems a balance is found in the response of those leading the Jerusalem Council. In the book of Acts, Peter states, "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood."⁶⁵ Andy Stanley paraphrases this verse this way, "Did you follow that? The Jerusalem Council effectively reduced church participation down to two things: be careful what you eat around your Jewish brothers and don't be immoral. That's it."⁶⁶

This thesis focuses on the portion of church growth the total church membership count can influence. Several practical steps are listed and discussed to remove barriers to church membership and encourage Christians to take proactive steps to grow the local church. However, there are spiritual elements that are crucial, and, when absent, make real kingdom growth impossible. Wayne E. Rogers in his thesis discusses with great clarity and insight these spiritual elements. Rogers's thesis findings on revitalizing the local church are assumptions this thesis made. When a local church follows Rogers's findings and implements the steps found in this research, the best results will be found in church growth.⁶⁷ Rogers pushes the reader to press new

⁶⁴ Matthew 16:18.

⁶⁵ Acts 15:19.

⁶⁶ Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 92.

⁶⁷ Wayne E. Rogers, "Overcoming Church Euthanasia: A Plan to Revitalize Dead and Dying Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention," D.Min thesis., Liberty University, 2015.

members and longtime church members into committing to Christ and to spiritual disciplines, which allow all believers to gauge levels of commitment to Christ.

There is a plethora of new member assimilation books and research papers for church growth. These typically are focused on how to get someone who has joined a church to begin to serve in the church, begin to attend worship regularly, and to join a Bible study group. Assimilation tends to be associated with the phrase “make them feel at home.” In his thesis, “Connecting With One Another: A Step-by-Step Approach to Guest and New Member Assimilation,” Kevin Ray Milburn writes a section on how to retain first-time guests.⁶⁸ Anyone looking to implement a guest follow-up system can adopt the system. The system is biblical and practical, and it includes many steps that can be delegated to the lay ministry teams of the church. The ability to delegate to lay ministers is one of the signs of the ultimate success of all Christian ministry.

A church for Christians is a church where faith in Christ is preached for the salvation of the soul. The result of this salvation is individuals free from the bondage of sin. However, salvation preached is different from salvation lived out in church polity and church relationships. First-time guests may return to the church for many more visits, but they would find joining unthinkable where there is tension and unChristlikeness is the church culture. The thesis by Alan McCullough, “Reasons Why Church Members Do Not Regularly Attend Church,” explains the necessity for church members to exemplify authentic Christian living.⁶⁹ If Christians have trouble attending an inauthentic Christian gathering, why would guests return who are or are not

⁶⁸ Kevin Milburn, “Connecting With One Another: A Step-By-Step Approach to Guest and New Member Assimilation,” D.Min. thesis., Liberty University, 2007.

⁶⁹ Alan McCullough, “Reasons Why Church Members Do Not Regularly Attend Church,” D.Min. thesis., Liberty University, 2006.

committed to that church? McCullough discusses fifteen characteristics every church should strive for if the intention is to be a biblically based church and have an environment where new people can feel welcomed and be disciplined in the faith.

A spiritually minded church is dedicated to evangelism and discipleship of believers. As churches in North America shift from using the number of members to the spiritual growth of members as a barometer of success, both would take place. Spiritually growing Christians are also highly evangelistic Christians. Highly evangelistic Christians will have a positive impact numerically for the kingdom of God. Chang Kyu Kim writes in his thesis,

The believers at the Jerusalem church opened their house to others, shared their possessions, and fellowshiped with others. The family-centered group grew up in double numbers while inviting and evangelizing others. Paul met Lydia in Europe and stayed at her house and evangelized people. Finally, the family became the foundation of Philippi church and believers grew up in double numbers. When small groups can be grouped into disciple-making groups, task-oriented groups, study groups, fellowship groups and social concern groups, the great reproduction will come.⁷⁰

Kim's thesis helps the reader keep the focus of church growth on the ministry of all Christians, not just the church staff. Also, Kim emphasizes that counting people is not the standard for assessing church growth; rather, true church growth is evidenced in the discipleship of current believers in Christ and the steady pursuit of those far away from God.

⁷⁰ Chang Kyu Kim, "Biblical Strategy and Shift to Spiritual Driven Church Growth," D.Min. thesis., Liberty University, 2010.

CHAPTER 2

EQUALLY ORTHODOX CHURCHES SHOULD BE INCREASING MEMBERSHIP

EQUALLY

Scriptural Basis for Church Membership

The text *Your Life and Your Church* by James L. Sullivan is important to the research in its central focus on Christ's intention for the Church. The writer states, "When the Bible said, 'Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it,'¹ it described Christ's affection and characterized Christ-followers. Christians love what Christ loved. One cannot please Jesus by neglecting His church. It would not be natural or possible for a Christian to love Jesus and yet be indifferent to the institution which Jesus loves so devotedly and for which He died so sacrificially."² If this statement were true, the implication is that one way Christians show committed love for Jesus is to drive others toward a commitment to the local church.

A second text that is influential in this study of church membership is *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation*.³ A portion of the text deals with this statement in the book, "Well the overall context for church attendance is getting mixed reviews, the baby boomers are bringing an increasing numbers of people into churches for the short term Young people 18 to 25 years of age (Gibbon calls these people transitional young adults) are less likely than any other age group to attend church."⁴ These "young adults" are now in their fifties. If they were less likely to attend church in the 1990s, they are even more unlikely to

¹ Ephesians 5:25.

² James L. Sullivan, *Your Life and Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1955), 16.

³ Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1987).

⁴ Ibid., 6–7.

attend now. Therefore, when someone of this age group attends a church, the church body should be implored to follow up with them and explore their spiritual well-being.

The United States of America and the Western culture are individualistic cultures. This mindset has created a society where the only rules that matter are the ones an individual creates. This is not so for the body of Christ. The book *The Art of Church Membership* explains, “the church has a right to expect great things of its members. Individual church members are obligated to the church. Those who are already in the church fold, and those who were thinking of becoming members of the church, should consider well, the obligations of being a church member.”⁵ The church has the right to expect certain behavior from the membership, but Christians should also have the right to expect certain behavior from other Christians. At the very top of the expectation list should be the expectation that Christians belong and carry forward the mantle of committing to another.

Church members are to be accountable to one another in the sense that each member must recognize the responsibility to engage the people who do not seem to be interested in the church and church members who seem to be leaving the “first love.”⁶ John Savage indicates the need for training the laity in staying committed to the love for Christ and what Christ has loved, His church.⁷ Therefore, one of the first tasks a church has is to train members to encourage and implore uncommitted Christians to commit to the church, which is to commit to other believers in church membership.

⁵ George Voiers Moore, *The Art of Church Membership* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1942), 46.

⁶ Revelation 2:4.

⁷ John S. Savage. *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member: Psychological and Theological Implications* (Pittsford, NY: LEAD Consultants, 1976), 77.

In the chapter “Single Elder Congregationalism,” Dr. Paige Patterson makes the case that both the elder of the church and the church’s membership lead each church. Without an active church membership, the church cannot function as it was intended to. Each church is filled with people with spiritual gifts and spiritual mandates from the Holy Spirit. When the church membership fails to use spiritual gifts and follow the mandates, churches fail the mission of Christ. Patterson stresses that the church body elects the church pastor and the church pastor is the head of the church second only to Christ. How can the local church together elect the leader of the church if the membership is not committed to one another? This is a strong case for each member of the body to commit to one another.⁸

The 9Marks publication, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*,⁹ describes in detail many of the concepts studied in this thesis, including the idea that church membership is not a concept formed after the closing of the New Testament, but can be easily sighted in the New Testament itself. The book clearly presents a biblical view of the church and church membership.

In his work, *12 Essential Doctrines: Systematic Theology*, Dr. Harold Willmington analyzes the beginning of the church, the purpose of the church, the enemies of the church, and the mission of the church.¹⁰ The book includes a history of where the church originated and the future hope of those belonging to the church universal and the church local.

The phrase “church discipline” requires Christians who are committed to one another. In *The Troubled and Triumphant Church*, Paige Patterson elaborates on the topic of church

⁸ Peter Toon, L. Roy Taylor, Paige Patterson, and Samuel Waldron, *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004) 1, 36.

⁹ Jonathan Leeman, *Building Healthy Churches: Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 35.

¹⁰ Harold Willmington, *12 Essential Doctrines: Systematic Theology* (Forest, VA: LHBI, 2014), 441-502.

discipline. He suggests that the modern church, in the area of church discipline, has failed miserably because Christians have lost the concept of the holiness of God and the importance of the church membership remaining pure, consisting of persons who are determined to do all they can to keep the bride of Christ pure for the day of her presentation to Christ. This book has framed for the researcher the profound need for the church to commit to scriptural guidelines for church membership to remain holy.¹¹

It is obvious in the New Testament that the community of believers is a high priority for the people of God. As previously stated, believers in the United States exist within a dualistic Western culture that encourages people to live life as they see fit. In his book *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, Thom Rainer explains why people who claim the name of Christ should meet together on a regular basis.¹² The book encourages churches to reclaim the commands of the Bible as a means of showing, not telling, a younger generation the Christian message. Sharing life together is an attractive part of the gospel mission in modern Christianity. In Hebrews 10:25, the author of the book explains that some Christians were already ignoring the mandate of Christ to share life together. The relevance of the command is not simply a matter of time or culture; it is ahistorical because of the human bent toward spiritual isolation in all ages.

Further, the very nature of God indicates that His followers are to work together to complete His mission. The Trinity communes with Himself, and this is a picture of what God's children are to model for the outside world. In the book *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, Bruce Ashford reminds Christians that churches are to work together to complete the

¹¹ Paige Patterson, *The Troubled and Triumphant Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 81.

¹² Thom Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville, NT: B&H Publishing, 2008), 46.

mission of God. Ashford's definition of the church means those who are called as Christians and have covenanted together to fulfill the purposes of God. Individualism is not acceptable to God, according to Ashford. The book also implores Christians to remember each Christian as redeemed by the act of one Man and this redemption compels believers to share the story of Christ with countless others.

The model church, First Baptist Church of Venice in Florida, added 304 new members in the five-year period researched. The new church membership numbers do not include children who attend with their families. The influence the church has on these children is a great blessing. Including new members and their children, the number of potential new attenders is more than five hundred. The years included in this research are 2010–2014 and the churches surveyed were asked to provide data for these years. The system used to produce this increase at First Baptist Church of Venice seemed to be successful in comparison with the other churches researched of similar size in the Southern Baptist Convention. In 2011, First Baptist Church of Venice received a letter of commendation for being in the top four percent in the number of baptisms for churches within its membership range.

The church's system for first-time guest follow-up is multi-faceted and has created an excitement about joining First Baptist and committing to the church's discipleship and outreach ministries. The research will compare First Baptist Church of Venice's first-time guest follow-up system with nine churches to analyze if these churches' systems have similar membership growth results. The research included three Southern Baptist churches, three United Methodist Churches, and three Wesleyan churches. All churches have at least five hundred members but not more than one thousand. This number was used because the current membership of First Baptist is 984.

Deciding Factors in Church Growth

Each denomination was chosen because of their agreement in doctrinal statements regarding several key theological factors. All three denominations believe in church membership. All three denominations believe Scripture is inspired by God and cannot be studied or interpreted without the Holy Spirit. Finally, all three denominations are in agreement that the only way for eternal salvation by God is by faith in the substitutionary birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Wesleyan Church

The Wesleyan churches were chosen for the denomination's evangelistic history and doctrinal positions on salvation by grace through faith, on the local church, on discipling the saved, and inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. The Wesleyan Discipline states the mission of the church as:

The Wesleyan Church believes that to spread scriptural holiness throughout every land involves joining the entire church of Christ in a full-orbed mission to the world, including the following:

- (1) Sharing the divine revelation of full salvation through Christ as recorded in the Holy Scripture so as to evangelize the lost and to minister redemptively to human society and its institutions.
- (2) Relating new converts to local churches and providing Spirit-filled and well-trained pastors and leaders for the same.
- (3) Developing in the converts patterns of worship to God and of fellowship with other believers.
- (4) Discipling new believers in turn to be witnesses for their Lord.
- (5) Guiding believers to experience entire sanctification so they are enabled to live whole and holy lives.
- (6) Providing for developing Christians lifelong nurture and instruction, encouraging each to grow toward spiritual maturity in Christ Jesus.
- (7) Helping maturing Christians to develop a Christian interpretation of life and the universe, training them to be good stewards of the talents, time, opportunities, and resources with which Christ has entrusted them.
- (8) Equipping believers for lives of dynamic service toward God and humanity, so

that the full potential God has designed for each of them may be realized.¹³

The obvious conclusion taken from The Discipline of the Wesleyan Church is the Wesleyan denomination's desires to spread the gospel and to move people from a sinful life to a relationship with God and with God's people. The Wesleyans also emphasize the great need believers have to be with other believers in a community of accountability and discipleship that centers its focus on sanctification.

United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church was chosen because of the Methodist doctrinal statement and the self-proclaimed desire to reach the nations with the gospel. Although the United Methodist Church has more moderate leanings, the church has a rich history of reaching out to all people with the great hope that individuals would join the local church. In *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012*, the denomination affirms this in Article V:

Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scripture for Salvation. The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the church.

The United Methodist Church's belief regarding Scripture was determined by this researcher as sufficient for the denomination to be compared with the Wesleyan and Southern Baptist churches in this study. Also, the United Methodist Church affirms in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* in Article IX: "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith, only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort." The

¹³ Donald D. Cady, Kenneth R. Heer, Wayne A. MacBeth, Jeffrey A. Mansell, and Ronald C. McClung, *The Wesleyan Church: The Discipline 2012*, edited by Glenn D. Black (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 10.

denomination's definition of salvation also compares similarly with that of the Wesleyans and the Southern Baptists. In addition, Article VIII of the same text offers this insight regarding the United Methodist Church's view on church membership: "The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." The church, according to the United Methodist denomination, mirrors closely the definition of the church in Wesleyan and Southern Baptist denominations.

Southern Baptist Convention

Southern Baptist churches were used in this research because the case study was centered on a Southern Baptist church. The First Baptist Church of Venice, the model church, is in southwest Florida and has a predominantly northern congregation as the members have moved to this area from Northeastern United States. Many of the members of the model church belonged to other denominations before moving to Sarasota County. One Southern Baptist church with a predominately southern-born membership was chosen to allow for a comparison between two Southern Baptist churches with different membership makeup. The Southern Baptist Convention has many doctrinal statements that resemble the United Methodist Church and Wesleyan Church. The Baptist Faith and Message states regarding the Scripture, "The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter."¹⁴ Secondly, The Baptist Faith and Message proclaims this regarding salvation,

Salvation includes the whole man. Salvation is given to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Jesus Christ by His own blood brought never-ending

¹⁴ Charles S. Kelley, Richard D. Land, and R. Albert Mohler, *The Baptist Faith & Message* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2007), 7.

salvation to the believer. Salvation includes being accepted just as you are when you turn from your sin. Salvation includes being set apart for His work. Salvation includes being made to worship God. There is no salvation without personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.¹⁵

Salvation by faith in Christ alone is a foundational doctrine for this research to be effective.

Without this doctrine, an individual would not be committing to a church family, but rather to a gathering for another reason other than worshipping God in Spirit and in truth. A final reason for researching Southern Baptist churches was also found in *The Baptist Faith and Message*. The authors of the statement explain that the evangelization and discipleship of the nations is the responsibility of every individual Christian.¹⁶ Developing Christlikeness in individual members is the goal for any evangelical church. The United Methodist Church, the Wesleyan Church, and the Southern Baptist Convention all state this as the goal for church members.

Each of the three denomination has standards for determining membership requirements, so surely each church has a process of taking guests from visiting to making a commitment to start a journey to Christlikeness. It would appear that committing to a church family would be the first decision to make for any new Christian. Inside the church family the new believer would be assured of a less threatening temptation to return to the old way of life as the new family would pray for and encourage the infant in Christ. This would be done through mentoring, worship, giving, and service to the local church.

The Model Church

The most exciting fact regarding the First Baptist Church of Venice's membership growth is the number of baptisms the aggressive church membership system has produced. Nearly forty percent of the 384 new members have come to church membership through baptism

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

at First Baptist. It is never the intention of this church to draw people from other churches; rather, First Baptist Church of Venice wants to reach the lost for Christ and then disciple the new convert to make disciples as well. Again, this fact should not be lost in the research; the words *commitment* and *membership* are interchangeable and membership should not be defined as having a list of names of people identifying with a church, but rather a list of names of people working toward the common goal of reaching and discipling the lost.

The average age of someone baptized at First Baptist is thirty-six years old. The baptism of those defined as millennials is minuscule around the country. However, the average age at First Baptist indicates the church's movement toward the direction of reaching people of all ages. The senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Venice, Pastor Tom Hodge, indicates that it is the vision of the church to be multi-generational. He stated, "I believe we can reach people of every age group and grow them in Christ. Everyone is welcome to worship with us."¹⁷

Guests typically move methodically through a church's membership system no matter what the system is. If the system is well-tuned then the guest will easily work through it; if the system is cumbersome or not well defined, the guest will struggle through. The question for churches in America regarding church growth is this, "How well-tuned is the system that our church has in place?" Some guests can become ready for membership quickly, while others may take years to move through the process. First Baptist has a well-defined system in place to help guests move from non-membership to a place of preparing for membership when the guest is ready. This is true for both children and adults.

¹⁷ Tom Hodge, "Yearly Business Meeting" (lecture, First Baptist Church of Venice, Florida, Venice, Florida, January 17, 2016).

It is important for those responsible in assisting people to commit to the church to know where guests are in the process. There are two lists non-members can choose to be on that also give the church some official influence in walking the guest to greater commitment to First Baptist Church of Venice. The Watchcare Ministry allows Christians who are away from home to join the church via Watchcare while in Venice. The person is placed on the church membership roll with the “tag” Watchcare. The Watchcare Ministry is, as the name indicates, a commitment from the Watchcare member to give, serve, attend, and support the church. The church commits to “watch” for Watchcare members and “care” for their needs. The Watchcare deacons follow up on Watchcare members in the same way a deacon would follow up with a full member. The Watchcare members are required to give testimony of salvation in Christ and be baptized by immersion. This process is beneficial because once a snowbird decides to live in the area full time, changing the membership status to full membership is as easy as a phone call requesting full membership. A Watchcare member would have already been presented to the church and voted on, with all the paperwork filled out. This process is simple and easy to complete. Although full church membership should be taken seriously and should not be entered into without much consideration through prayer, the paperwork and administration to prepare for membership should be simple and easy to navigate.

A second level of connection to the church is one available to children. The average age of child baptisms is alarming as it drops in the Southern Baptist Convention. Parents are desirous that their children know what baptism means for their own spiritual life. In response, First Baptist of Venice instituted a “Steps Toward Jesus” listing for children claiming to have been saved, but are not yet ready for baptism. This classification also makes for an easy transition once the pastor and the child’s parents agree that baptism is appropriate for the child. Once the

child is baptized, the child is voted upon by the membership and is considered a full member of the church body. Children are saved in the same way adults are saved and should therefore enter church membership in the same way adults do.

The lists containing Watchcare members and Steps Toward Jesus members are reviewed yearly so the staff can aggressively move people on each list toward full membership. The lists are also used as a tool to review the person's spiritual progress. Obviously, a person can show outward signs of spiritual graces while unconverted, but this process provides concrete steps for the church leadership to review the individuals' group attendance, giving record, and involvement in serving the body. These alone are not the sole criteria for spiritual growth but are certainly indicators of movement toward positive spiritual maturity.

Research on the topic of new member assimilation typically focuses on how to move an individual into the life of the church after making a commitment to the church. This research instead investigated how to move an individual from visiting a church's worship gathering or small group to making the commitment to the local church body. Writers Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey explain it this way, "Effective evangelistic disciple makers understand that real ministry runs on the track of relationships. Jesus moved into the neighborhood of those He wanted to win (John 1:14). He invited the men who eventually became His disciples to follow Him home for the day (John 1:35-39), and He was notorious for eating with sinners (Luke 15:1-2)."¹⁸ Earley and Dempsey are passionate about making disciples outside of the church wall, but neither would be opposed to making disciples inside the church walls with those who are potentially outside of the kingdom of God and happen to enter the traditional church setting

¹⁸ Earley, Dave, and Rod Dempsey. *Disciple Making Is--: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2013), 138–139.

through the invitation of a church member. A second highlight from Earley and Dempsey's book is the emphasis on asking disciples to make the appropriate commitments at the appropriate times. This insight regarding a couple Earley shared Christ with is enlightening: "A few weeks later, they accepted the invitation to be baptized. Then they accepted the invitation to take the membership class and get actively involved in the ministry of the church."¹⁹ A membership class is ultimately a class explaining the mission of the church and asking people to join the movement. As Neal Cole writes,

Many people ask for benchmarks to measure the success of the organization, as if that is measuring the church. It is not. The church is not the building, the organization, the programs, or the events. You can measure all those things and still not measure the success or failure of the church because the church is something else entirely... the church is disciples in relation together on a mission surrendering to Jesus and allowing him to influence the world through them.²⁰

Using the spiritual gifts God gives each new believer, the church can then march onward in its mission of growing both the universal church and the local church. Dempsey writes, "Paul points out that the body of Christ is to be built up and that it grows strong by 'the proper working of each individual part.' Stated negatively, if there are parts of the body not working 'properly,' the body will not be healthy."²¹ A healthy church, according to Dempsey and Earley, is one that has Christians all growing in Christ, all serving using spiritual gifts, and all doing so in the proper place.²² The remainder of this chapter continues to review other academic research and discover the principles regarding fulfilling the Great Commission and growing the local church as Christians commit to one another and to the heart of God to reach others.

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

²⁰ Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, *Church Transfusion: Changing Your Church Organically from the Inside Out* (San Francisco, CA., Jossey-Boss, 2012), 169.

²¹ Earley, 188.

²² Ibid., 189.

Turning Attenders to Members

When a congregation's membership rolls increase, often the people on the roll are unaccounted for, and this is not a healthy characteristic and is unquestionably unbiblical. When a church membership roll is so large that people can live in anonymity, something must change. Hiring new staff, dividing and multiplying church congregations, and using small groups in a more effective way are all options to eliminating the issue; however, there are great benefits to bringing in new members to a group of worshippers. As Douglass K. Tanner writes,

Once the "already active" believer is identified by his consistent actions, it is important to begin an inconspicuous assimilation. Inconspicuous assimilation is simply giving someone simple tasks that will involve him in ministry and then walking him through the tasks. Caution should be exercised when doing this so the already active believer does not become overburdened or so the leader does not take on too many apprentices. It would be wise to limit the tasks in both scope and depth to make sure burnout does not occur. Keep in mind that beginning an assimilation program is not something accomplished overnight, but rather it is a process that grows with the leader and the followers.²³

The more followers accept the responsibility to care for the members of the church and for bringing in more souls into the kingdom, the more successful the ministry will be, and it will be a sign of a healthy, biblical community.

In building the Christian gathering, the only thing that is eternal is God's Word. Every other facet of Christianity can be changed and altered. Tanner's belief that the "already active" Christian should be monitored before beginning the discipleship process might have been the paradigm when he wrote, but the church today should seek out anyone wanting to be discipled. Unbelievers cannot practice Christian disciplines alone and could be invited to witness the disciplines being practiced passionately by a gathering of Christians. Andy Stanley writes, "I

²³ Douglass K. Tanner, "From Visitor to Minister: Designing a Program for the Assimilation of New Members into the Life and Ministry of the Local Church," PhD thesis., Liberty University, 2005, 21.

grew up attending a church that was designed for church people. No one said it, but the assumption was that church was for church people. The unspoken message to the outside world was, ‘Once you start believing and behaving like us, you are welcome to join us.’”²⁴ A shift to a church growth philosophy that allows outsiders to attend Christian gatherings may grant the lost world a wonderful opportunity to hear the gospel as Christians welcome all people into Bible studies, group cookouts, and fellowship opportunities. As the church member works with the outsider, and the outsider is converted to Christ and desires a greater knowledge of the workings of the church, the church can celebrate Christ’s grace together.

Churches need structure, bylaws, etc., but the new believer needs to grow in the spiritual disciplines. Tanner appears to state correctly, “After reviewing the spiritual development of the church, it was concluded that there were five basic spiritual disciplines necessary for a new believer to practice; Worship and celebration, study, prayer, evangelism and supporting the ministry of the church. These basic disciplines are believed to be necessary for every believer to understand and practice to grow as a Christian and as a church member.”²⁵ It must be stressed that the desire for increased church membership does not merely entail increasing the number of church members; rather, it aims to grow a group of believers dedicated to one another and to discipleship, which will increase the influence Christ on the lost and those committed to one another and to the spreading of the gospel.

Each gathering of Christians connected through a commitment known as church membership has a recognized system in place to move people from visiting the group to committing to the mission of the group. This is considered membership. This is true no matter

²⁴ Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 69.

²⁵ Tanner, “From Visitor to Minister,” 36.

the size of the church. The research conducted by this writer focused on five main characteristics of a successful system that moves church guests to becoming a committed member to the mission of the church: following up on every guest, communicating the importance of church membership, providing multiple opportunities to commit, informing the church family of new members, and assimilating newcomers into a group.

Follow-Up on Every Guest

Follow-up on the first-time guest is the essential factor in making another person feel comfortable at any church gathering. Without follow-up, the guest is left not knowing if visiting was appreciated or even noticed. There are many first-time church guest horror stories. Visitors share stories of being told by a church member, “You are sitting in my pew,” or being called upon to be introduced in front of the entire congregation. As bad as these stories can be, nothing is worse than being completely ignored or not followed up on in any way by the church after the initial visit. Guest follow-up does not have to be a home visit or even a phone call, but reaching out through a text, note, or letter can make the difference in a visitor’s decision to return to the church. People generally desire to be recognized in some way. This is true if the church body meets in a 10,000-seat worship center in a large metropolitan downtown complex, or if they are meeting in a living room with ten other people in the suburbs of a small town. In his thesis, Kevin Milburn writes, “Once a guest has visited a church, hopefully with a memorable experience, it is necessary to follow-up with them after the service. The immense preparation in providing relevant and meaningful services is lost if there is no way of reaching out to the guest after the visit. There must be some way to contact them concerning their worship experience.”²⁶ Many churches have decided that asking guests to fill out and turn in information cards that are

²⁶ Milburn, “Connecting to One Another,” 35–36.

inserted into the Sunday morning bulletin is the best way to get their information. First Baptist of Venice has decided it is best to get information in any way possible. As to be elaborated on in chapter four, the church can receive information from children's check-in, through iPad check-in in student ministry, sign-up forms on the website, at ministry events like ladies' Bible studies, and special event sign-up for the Costume Carnival hosted at the church's Executive Drive Location. Simply put, no matter what First Baptist does, the church asks new people to sign in and the sign-in list becomes another avenue to contact people to discover the condition of the soul and ascertain if the guest can be funneled into a discipleship process. Ultimately, as has been stated and restated in this paper, the goal is to connect with people to get as many people as possible assimilated into the discipleship process with other Christians in the pursuit of Christlikeness; to lead people in a commitment to Christ, then to Christ's church. Neil Cole writes, "Our mission is to find and develop Christ-followers rather than church members. There is a big difference. The difference is seen and transformed lives that bring change to neighborhoods and nations. Simply gathering a group of people who subscribe to a common set of beliefs is not worthy of Jesus and the sacrifice he made for us."²⁷ It is true that some church attenders can visit a church for years without making some degree of commitment to the other group members, but ultimately when people are committed formally to a cause and to one another, the impact the group can make is greater. Cole elaborates,

In our first year, we began 10 new churches. In our second year, Church Multiplication Associates (CMA) started 18 churches. The next year, we added 52 new starts. The momentum was beyond our expectations. In 2002, we averaged two churches a week being started and had 106 starts. The following year, we saw around 200 starts in a single year. We estimate that close to 400 churches were started in 2004, but counting churches has become a daunting

²⁷ Cole and Helfer, *Church Transfusion*, 170.

task. At the time of this writing, there have been close to 800 churches started in 32 states and 23 nations around the world, in only six years.²⁸

Cole does not chose to count the number of people attending one of the church plants, but he knows almost exactly how many churches are involved in CMA. A reporting system for such a large organization would be daunting, but it is fair to say these churches have committed themselves to a mission and each church has more than one person attending, which individuals are being discipled to carry on the mission. The members of Cole's organization have committed to one another. Each one of the churches Cole planted is interacting on a personal level with individuals. Milburn makes this excellent point regarding the individuality of systems: "Every church must have a method in place to collect information on guests. Without collecting information on guests, it will be impossible to perform any kind of follow-up. Each church may approach this aspect differently. Much of this process will depend upon the context and there is certainly flexibility as to how each church might collect the information."²⁹ A smaller church, a house church for instance, would not have a great need for forms with detail about the visitors, as follow-up would be easy. One or two visitors a week may be the norm. However, the larger the church gathering, the more detail is needed in the system used for information gathering.

Communicate the Importance of Membership

J. Paul Nyquist explains that deserting the church is different from abandoning other organizations, because even though these organizations do wonderful philanthropic work, they were not birthed by God like the church was.³⁰ The church is where membership and partnership

²⁸ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 26.

²⁹ Milburn, "Connecting to One Another," 36.

³⁰ Paul J. Nyquist and Carson Nyquist, *The Post-Church Christian: Dealing with the Generational Baggage of Our Faith* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2013), 77.

are taught as synonymous words. In the works of the individual church members, the greater body of Christ will see incredible victories in fulfilling the Great Commission. The members of a church should recognize that the people that make up the local church are in a partnership with one another in spreading the message of Christ. This partnership should be entered into with a greater amount of seriousness and focus. Relying on the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, Thom Rainer explains the importance of communicating the need for church membership (partnership),

Early in the letter he [Paul] tells the members of the church that the main reasons he has such an unfading love for them: "I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you, always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." Did you get that? Did you read clearly why he was so thankful, why he had so much joy? The last portion of the sentence answers these questions: "...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." The church understood her purpose. The members at Philippi knew what they were supposed to do. They were to live the gospel. They were to proclaim the Gospel. They were to partner with Paul in the gospel. Their purpose was totally and completely gospel-centered.³¹

One author offers this insight, "The worship and practice of the early church was carried forth in recognition of a submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Members of these Christ-centered communities offered worship, praise, and thanksgiving to the Lord while dedicating themselves for ministry (Romans 12:1)."³² Ray F. Van Neste, in writing about the Book of Hebrews and the doctrine of the church, adds,

Significantly, it is church members ("brothers") who are called to be aware on behalf of one another. Church leaders are discussed elsewhere (13:7, 17), but the emphasis here is on the duty of the congregation and helping one another to persevere. Christians must "encourage each other daily... so that none of you is

³¹ Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 74–75.

³² Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan, *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 112.

hardened by sin's deception" (3:13). This assumes regular, substantive interaction among church members concerning the state of our souls.(4:1).³³

Church membership for the early Christian was considered a great commitment and responsibility and this was discussed in early communications within the Christian faith. This level of responsibility should be preached constantly from the pulpits in America. Therefore, a New Testament church should be communicating to everyone attending worship services and Bible studies that there is a profound importance and value in dedicating this life to Christ and to other Christians. This relationship is a deeply held biblical value by Christians throughout the ages and can be described as church membership.

Provide Opportunities to Commit

Many Baptist churches only provide one means of joining the church—invitation in the form of the altar call, when attenders accept the invitation and walk to the front at the end of the worship service. However, churches offering multiple, separate opportunities for joining the fellowship are more likely to gain new members than those that restrict such opportunities to the altar call. Church membership is vital, as it binds the hearts of the Christians in a local community to one another. Author Peter Masters points out that the Bible defines church membership in 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.”³⁴ Another writer defines membership this way: “The act of ‘joining’ and ‘belonging’ to church implies relationship and to ‘be connected with . . . [signifying] a very close dependence or bond.’”³⁵ With that, the emphasis for new members is that the “church” is not a building but a community

³³ Ibid., 129.

³⁴ Peter Masters, *Church Membership in The Bible* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 2008), 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

of people connected through faith.³⁶ If this is correct, then why would churches only provide a two or three-minute opportunity, by way of a formal invitation at the end of the worship service, once or twice a week for someone to join in the broader group of church members? Churches that delight in seeing new members will provide many opportunities for guests to express and act on the conviction they feel to join the church and to commit to the mission of spreading the gospel.

Inform the Family

There are two reasons for informing the church family of new members. One is a biblical reason; the other is its derived benefit for the congregation. Jesus commands new believers to be baptized. There is no other way to stay faithful to the Lord and His Word than to baptize new believers into the family of God and into the local gathering of Christians. Additionally, the local church receives encouragement when the evidence of great spiritual labor is witnessed in the waters of baptism. The church family has prayed for new converts, volunteered in the ministries of the church to reach new converts, and given tithes and offerings to the Lord in faith to reach new converts. To publicly witness the result of their commitment to the church, a converted soul, would encourage the church family and energize it to continue in the ministry. Christians should get no greater joy than to see new converts publicly profess Jesus as Lord in the waters of baptism. When baptism is celebrated before the local church family, a feeling of accomplishment will follow in the hearts of the church members.

Introducing other believers who have previously been baptized and are coming from another church is not the goal of the evangelistic church, but it can nonetheless be an exciting

³⁶ Pamela J. Stanley, "New Member Assimilation: Closing the Back Door through Systemic Membership Management," PhD diss., Drew University, 2015, 42.

moment for the local church, especially if the believers have moved to the area and have been led by the Lord to make a specific church home. It is also true where snowbirds have been visiting for many years and have decided to move to the area permanently, and their decision to join a church as a full-time member can be a joyous event in the life of the congregation. In many parts of the country, especially the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and Florida, there are high rates of retirees moving in and needing a church home. The local church should publicly recognize these new members. The whole church body needs to be aware of how God is speaking and moving in the lives of everyone associated with a church family, both members and guests.

Regarding baptism, the Bible records Peter's exhortation in Acts:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.³⁷

Baptism as the public profession of faith is the foundational step in the life of a believer in any local church. F. F. Bruce agrees: "baptism in water continued to be the visible sign by which those who believe the gospel, repented of their sins, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord were publicly incorporated into the spirit baptized fellowship of the new people of God."³⁸ Baptism should be performed as symbol in the life of the new believer to cement the decision to follow God, as well as an encouragement to the individual members of the church and a significant evangelism tool. Andy Stanley explains North Point's view of the power of baptism video testimonies, "You have to allow us to video record a three-minute version of your story to be

³⁷ Acts 2:38–41.

³⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, vol. 3, *The International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing), 1988, 70.

shown on Sunday morning to be baptized. No video, no baptism. We don't have any verses to support that. It keeps the baptism numbers low. But baptism is central to our worship and arguably our most powerful evangelism tool.”³⁹ Baptism is the culmination of the church’s task to baptize and a recognition that the new convert has committed to being disciplined. It is this writer’s view that a person should not be baptized unless they are committing to be disciplined by other Christians. This writer also does not believe that a person who will not be baptized should be considered born-again. Granted, this is a strong theological statement. The question would have to be asked of a person not desiring baptism, “How can a person claiming to have Jesus as the Lord refuse to do the very first thing He commands?” Obviously, there are Godly people who would disagree with this opinion.

Assimilate into a Group

Introducing a new Christian or new church member into a small group of other Christians is the only way to ensure accountability for the person. It also must be said that a smaller group of Christians must know how to appropriately lead the small group. Small groups are not therapy sessions; nor are they groups where the members may monopolize the conversations and pontificate about subjects not related to the spiritual growth of the others. Disciple-makers are mentors and can assist Christians in a multitude of areas, but the primary reason for small groups is to encourage believers to go further spiritually. Dave Earley explains that the disciple-maker must constantly urge the disciples to go to the next level with the goal of multiplication in mind.⁴⁰ Incorporating new Christians into a group that will begin a molding process that leads them to make other disciples is the only process whereby the Great Commission can be

³⁹ Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 81.

⁴⁰ Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is--*, 126.

accomplished. The church must learn to multiply the efforts of evangelism by multiplying the number of evangelists and disciple-makers. One researcher explains the results of focusing attention on making disciples rather than growing numbers in the congregations worship service, “As pastor this project has been transformational for me in that it turned my thinking upside down on a number of interrelated issues—small groups, recruiting volunteers, how to encourage membership—and how to meet people just where they are.”⁴¹ Rethinking small groups and the purpose for meeting together in this type of group must occur often, as it is easy to lose sight of the purpose.

In reviewing a Harvard University study, Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger recall the second reason the researchers discovered people transform is community. Geiger and Stetzer point out that God supernaturally ordained Christian communities to mature, challenge, encourage, and sanctify believers, which is essential for the transforming the heart of all Christians.⁴² Church members not attending a small group where disciple-making transpires, will not be able to hold on to, in a meaningful way, the tenets of the church and their commitment to the church. One researcher states that the number of churches with casual or inactive members has increased nationally, and if the casual members do not participate in fellowship with other believers within the church family, they will be satisfied to participate minimally in the church ministries or will leave the church altogether.⁴³ The impact that attending a small group can have on the overall local church is astounding. Again, Geiger and Stetzer’s research is enlightening regarding people who choose to attend small group Bible study:

⁴¹ Anthony Lowe, “New Member Assimilation for the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church,” PhD diss., Drew University, 2011, 68.

⁴² Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2014), 141.

⁴³ Pamela Stanley, “New Member Assimilation,” 51.

Individuals who regularly attend small groups are consistently making more progress in their spiritual development than those who are not. This is especially true in building relationships within their church. They're more likely to take on responsibilities within their church (63%). Including leadership functions. They read (67% at least a few times a week) and study (43% at least a few times a week) the Bible more and have a more consistent prayer life. They are more actively inviting others to church and sharing their faith.⁴⁴

The five steps for gaining a greater number of members in the local church are a means to bring glory to God, evangelize the world, and disciple Christians. When these three goals are accomplished, the influence of the Christian worldview is increased. The research found in this study indicated that these five steps are effective in increasing the local congregation's membership.

The following chapter is a discussion that what a church believes about church growth and church membership does not determine its numerical growth. As important as core beliefs about church growth and membership are, those beliefs do not correlate with the actual growth of a church.

⁴⁴ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 157.

CHAPTER 3

FACTORS RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT TO CHURCH GROWTH

James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote to Christians, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”¹ A church body cannot only believe the right doctrines and expect to grow the church membership. Believing doctrine, as this research concludes, does not correlate with church growth, although it is foundational. Church growth happens when a church family sees the value of church membership and passionately pursues lost persons and uncommitted Christians.

Core Doctrines Held by Surveyed Local Churches

Subscription to doctrinal statements among the churches researched, though the doctrines are highly orthodox and consistent with other evangelistic churches, did not result in equally substantial church growth in the time researched. The following is a brief description of common characteristics of the surveyed churches.

Authority of the Bible

Each church in the survey has relatively the same description for their beliefs about the Bible. Each participant used one of these words to explain the Bible: “inspired,” “revelation,” “inerrant,” “authority,” “Holy,” or “infallible.” A Christian leader’s belief regarding God’s Word is of the utmost importance because the Bible is where Christianity finds the truth about mankind, God, sin, salvation, eternal life, and the church as the visible expression of the risen Christ.² A group of people declaring to be Christians, but not believing the Bible as God’s Word and revelation with not the slightest error cannot be successful in fulfilling the Great

¹ James 1:22.

² 2 Timothy 3:16.

Commission and adding souls to the household of God locally or universally. Without a belief in the inerrancy of the Holy Scripture, nor will that local church be successful in assisting people in the sanctification process. Usually, churches not believing in the inerrancy of Scripture move members into moral justification or fulfilling social causes rather than justification by faith alone and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit using “every word Jesus said.”³ According to Scripture, the church’s highest goal is not to make the world a better place or to make sinners morally justified. Rather, it is the church’s task to bring sinners to faith in Christ and to disciple new converts to do the same. The Bible is the final judge and only counsel for deciding whether a church is successful. The Scripture alone has the authority in identifying the purposes of the local church and the purposes of each person confessing Christ as Lord.

Belief in the Word of God is the starting point in growing His kingdom and the local church. The Word of God is also the vehicle by which individual Christians grow in spiritual depth. The recognition of the power of the Word of God preached and of individuals’ need of the Holy Spirit to move in their hearts is paramount to any church growth effort. Preaching should be biblical and the Bible must be presented as the very words of God if the church wants to witness true spiritual growth in the hearts of the hearers and to see numerical growth in the people willing to commit to Christ and to one another in a common gospel endeavor. “Dynamic preaching is one of the effective means of making evangelism and missionary works active,”⁴ says Kyoung Pan Kim, a researcher of dissertations published from 2004 to 2008 on the subject of church growth. One cannot preach Christ and Him crucified if the preacher is does not have the assurance of the Bible being the actual word of God, and the preaching cannot bring

³ John 14:26.

⁴ Kyoung Pan Kim, “An Analysis on Dissertations on Church Growth Published During the Past Five Years (2004–2008),” D.Min. thesis., Liberty University, 2009, 51.

conviction in the hearers if they have any doubt as to the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. It seems at worst counterintuitive and at best unproductive to share “good news” that may or may not be true. For the preaching of the Word to be effective and convey significance and meaning, the hearers must be assured that both the preacher and the church believe without any measure of doubt, what the Word says. After all, it is the eternal destiny of the hearer at stake. The churches surveyed all communicated the belief that the Bible is the Word of God and contains all that is necessary for practice of the Christian religion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It appears that the churches researched also understand the value of preaching what the Bible says about “belonging” to the local church. Ultimately, if a pastor stands up and states that it is only the opinion of the staff that people should belong to one another in a covenant relationship, then those words represent merely an opinion. However, if preacher stands and speaks to the congregation with the authority of God on the subject and the Holy Spirit is active in the hearts of the people, the church family should see Christians responding positively in moving toward church membership. Nine of the ten staff members interviewed stated that the pastor of the church has presented the importance of church membership in worship gatherings within the last year. One staff member stated, “we had a vision retreat and the people in attendance were given the book *I Am the Church*. Once we read it, we were asked to pass it to another congregation member and keep it going. Pastor then preached on it a few times following that and will reference it.”⁵ Another staff member of another church explained, “we do have a new member induction service that incorporates the membership into the vows.”⁶ The

⁵ Anonymous Interview (church staff member) in discussion with the author, June 2016.

⁶ Anonymous Interview (church staff member) in a discussion with the author, May 2016.

pastor of this staff member's church asks new members to make vows to become church members, and this is done in front of the church body.

Even though the pastors researched are preaching from the Bible and believe the Bible, it appears that their agreement in this respect does not determine a church's effectiveness in reaching new comers for church membership or for salvation. As the research showed, a church's strength in incorporating new members into the fellowship of the church lies within the system it uses to move new people to make that commitment. The church cannot rely on preaching alone to connect newcomers to God's people within a congregation. The first step in this is to make sure the church body knows how the New Testament defines the word *church*—the gathering together of Christ-followers for a unique call and commitment (membership).

Definition and Function of the Church

As stated above, the Bible determines how theological terms are defined. Without the Scripture, Christ-followers would have to define words without the certainty of God's approval. The Bible defines what church means and how it functions, and each pastor bears witness to this definition in their pastoral ministry.

Several themes emerged in the churches researched regarding their definition of the word *church*. When asked what the church is and what the church should be doing, respondents in this study used these words: "the church should be preaching the word of God,"⁷ "the church is the Body of Christ," "the church should be fulfilling the Great Commission," "the church is a gathering of baptized believers," "the church is responsible for conducting the sacraments," "the church is believers in a covenantal agreement," "the church is the Bride of Christ," and "the church is a group of growing Christ-followers and a group of witnesses gathered to show the

⁷ Anonymous Surveys (Senior Pastor Surveys), June 2016.

love of Christ.” All of these capture the Bible’s definition of the church and how it should function in the world.

Evangelism and Discipleship

Ultimately, all church ministries should serve one of two purposes: serving the Lord through acts of personal and corporate worship and seeking to save that which is lost.⁸ These two aims together express the mission of every individual Christian and every individual church: to care about what Jesus cared about. When Christians participate meaningfully in private and public worship, the local church is strengthened to advance the gospel, and the conversion of the formerly lost soul prompts extraordinary jubilation in heaven.⁹ Evangelism is the heart of God, and as such, it should be the heart of the people of God; however, what a church professes about evangelism does not always indicate its desire to seek the lost and unchurched.

The early church used worship gatherings as a tool for the sanctification of those committed to Christ and committed to one another in membership. The phrases used by the pastors in the survey can be a visible example of the difference Christ has made in the lives of the church members and therefore the worship gathering is also considered an evangelistic tool. This is in keeping with the earliest Christian gathering.¹⁰ As non-Christians see how Christians relate to one another and the submissive attitude the believers have toward the Savior, their internal conscience can be stirred positively toward Christ. Likewise, when non-Christians observe how Christian families conduct their lives in the context of small groups throughout the week, God can assist the non-Christians in seeing their need for repentance and faith in Christ. The point is that no matter where the unsaved encounters believers, the Christians should use the

⁸ Luke 19:10.

⁹ Luke 17:7.

¹⁰ Acts 2:14–36.

opportunity to engage the unsaved with the gospel. Outsiders, as Paul calls non-Christians, can observe Christian worship, lifestyle, and work ethic and be moved by the Holy Spirit to repentance.¹¹ The Christian lifestyle is to be one of constant evangelism in every facet of life. There can be no departmentalization for the person called to reach the nations for the Savior.¹² Every aspect of life should be distinctively Christian.

After reaching a person for Christ, the goal becomes helping the individual find a place in the local church and begin the discipleship process. The new spiritual nature should be cultivated to drive the person to relentlessly refresh the spirit and use the talents and spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to grow the body of Christ and assist in maturing other believers.¹³ This is true whether a person has been a Christian for twenty-five years or twenty-five minutes.

Human nature, however, is very individualistic and can persuade even the most well-intentioned person that the Christian life can be led without the assistance of others.¹⁴ The weekly worship service is one way that Christians can see how that specific church functions. The life Jesus modeled was one of mutual submission and service, and these characteristics should be visible in every worship gathering. As an example of this may be found when one group of church members allow the music preference of another group of church members have preference.

Definitions of the term *church* that respondents gave in the survey were orthodox. The results of the research, however, showed that having an orthodox belief does not necessarily indicate a church's effectiveness in living out that definition. Not all churches surveyed

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 5:12–13.

¹² Matthew 28:19–20.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 12.

¹⁴ Colossians 4:5–6.

systematically or effectively reach first-time guests and outsiders for Christ or assist church membership prospects in moving to the biblical commitment of church membership, which demonstrates Christians' mutual submission for the unchurched.

Salvation

Prior to a person joins the local church or comes to the belief that eternal life is present within the heart, they must be told a biblical view of salvation, whether by a pastor or lay person. The churches surveyed expressed biblical understanding of God's plan for redemption. However, again, this research found that a biblical understanding of salvation did not correlate with the growth of the local church in the five-year span researched.

The most important question that pastors were asked in this research was how a person can come to be reconciled to God. Many religions focus on the works of mankind for reconciliation to God. Sadly, this is also true in many Protestant churches and is preached knowingly and unknowingly from pulpits throughout the world; however, and praise be to God, reconciliation through personal good works is not the message taught in the Bible or by the pastors participating in this research. God is a God of grace and mercy and He has given humans salvation as a free gift if received by faith. Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."¹⁵ Thankfully, the pastors who took the survey believe these words of Jesus. The words and phrases they used to describe the path to reconciliation between God and mankind were "faith," "repentance," "believing," "atonement," "accept Jesus as Lord," and "resurrection from the dead." These pastors believe in the salvation of the whole person for eternity. It is clear from the survey answers that every participant has an orthodox, biblical view

¹⁵ John 6:29.

of salvation, that it is through Christ and Christ alone by expressing faith in His birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection.

However, a church's understanding of salvation through faith in Christ alone does not indicate its effectiveness in reaching visitors with the gospel or bringing guests to membership. Only seventy percent of pastors publicly or privately encouraged fellow staff members to move people to membership, even though ninety percent of staff members indicated that their pastors model a desire to move people to membership. This means that while the pastors may express that it is important for the church to have new members, only thirty percent of the ones in this research actively encourage staff members to move people to membership commitment. Actions are just as important as words of affirmation. Jesus told his disciples, as the community of early Christ-followers was being developed, to be soul-winners and bring new people into the fold.¹⁶ Paul told the Corinthian Christians to imitate him in bringing people to Christ,¹⁷ the most effective evangelist the Christian faith has produced. Paul planted at least twenty churches and personally brought thousands to Christ. A pastor who encourages a staff and lay leadership to reach people for Christ will lead a church to become a growing congregation that imitates the life of both Jesus and the Apostle Paul. At a church where people are led to Christ and the spiritual benefits of church membership is explained and encouraged, there will be many new members and the church will have a growing influence in the local community. However, the effectiveness of growing a church's size and influence may depend on more than words of encouragement toward church membership. A well-designed system can help produce the best possible results.

¹⁶ Matthew 9:37.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:17.

Factors Uncorrelated with Church Growth

In addition to their agreement in the doctrines central to Christianity, the churches surveyed in this study were also similar in other ways, from size (see Table 3.1) to the number of new guests they receive each week; however, these similarities did not result in similar church growth. As the study would show, it is not beliefs, size of the church, or the number of first-time guests that influences church growth.

Table 3.1. Total Church Membership in 2014

696	884	600	600	814	549	986	787	1000	310
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Age Distribution

In Luke's gospel, he describes the kinds of people who were following Jesus, people who at first glance might be considered out of place in the Bible.¹⁸ Chapter 8 of the gospel is a beautiful passage that makes clear the gospel is offered to anyone, no matter the person's age. The age of the first-time church guests in this research did not factor into the effectiveness of the churches' strategies for church growth.

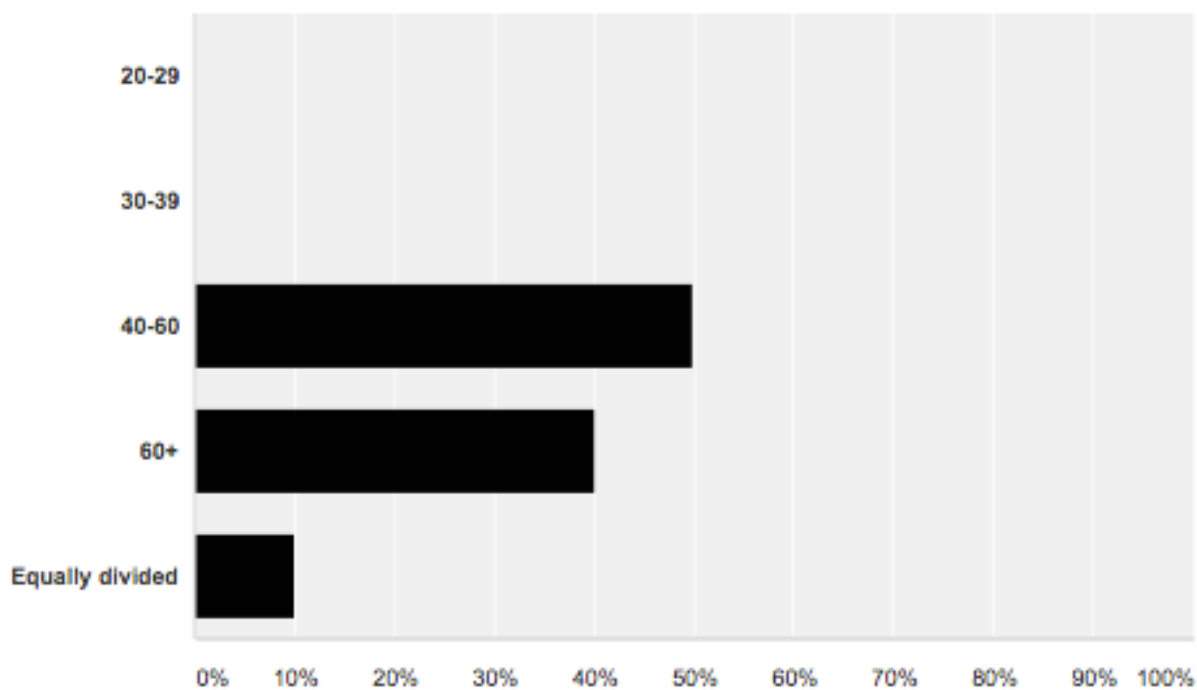
Ninety percent of the members of the churches surveyed were forty years of age and above. This is important as many have questioned whether different strategies should be implemented to reach different age groups. While it is true that every generation has unique characteristics, what is also true—and an eternal truth—is that people respond to the gospel by the testimonies of other people followed by a presentation of the gospel. Jesus' method for outreach and growth is closely related to the word *relationships*. Every person needs at least one other person to invest into their mutual relationship for spiritual growth to occur. Deciding to

¹⁸ Luke 8.

join a church is a great first step toward spiritual growth, as God uses the church as a body to fulfill eternal purposes. This discipleship method was set by Jesus, not the institutional church; therefore, His model is to be emulated until His return.

Whatever objections may be raised about church growth paradigms, this study reviewed churches with a very similar membership age range (see Figure 3.1). Only one church defines itself as “equally divided” among the generations. A church with a larger age range of younger people would naturally have a larger number of children on the membership roll, but the children may not be considered full members of the church and may also account for a higher number of baptisms by counting paedobaptisms. Since each church in this study subscribed to the view of salvation as individual faith in Christ and baptizing unrepentant babies is not biblical, paedobaptisms were not represented in this study.

Figure 3.1 Age of Church Members

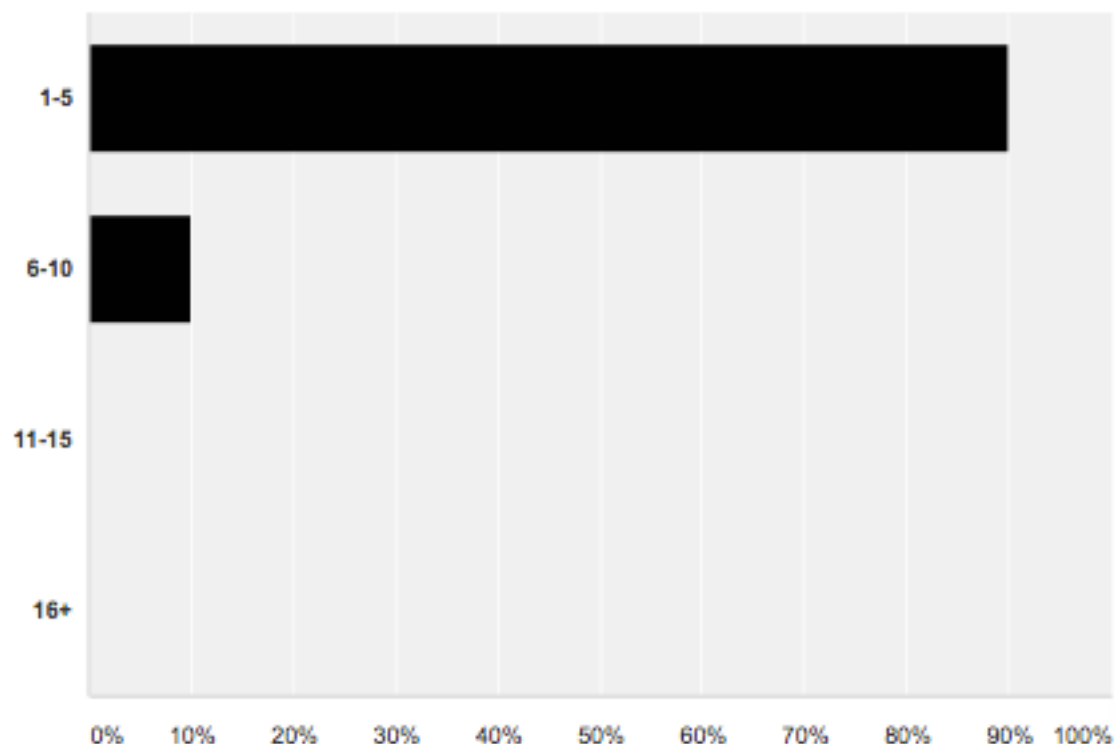


Number of Guests

It may be assumed that churches within larger communities may receive a larger number of guests. The churches surveyed for this research, no matter its geographical location, had within one and ten guests each week during the five-year period studied. Considering this fact, it may be assumed again that the philosophy and system in which follow-up is acted upon is the central tenet determining the growth of membership.

When asked how many first-time guests visited the church service each weekend, the churches in the study reported similar numbers (see Figure 3.2). Ninety percent of the churches surveyed had one to five first-time guests. Only one church reported having five to ten first-time guests each week. The similarity in the figures suggests that the sample churches may have the same opportunity to grow their church membership at an equal rate of increase. However, they did not experience equal growth, as this research found that the number of visitors did not correlate with the number of members added to the church family yearly. As will be discussed in greater detail below, these churches share some of the same strategies but also have unique characteristics when it comes to following up with first-time guests.

Figure 3.2 Number of First-Time Guests Per Sunday



Denominations

The three Southern Baptist churches had an average growth of thirty-one people in five years. During the same time period, the two Wesleyan churches saw a decrease in membership during the same time period, and the United Methodist churches had an average growth of forty people. As such, a church's denomination did not seem to affect growth or decline. However, historical data nationwide would suggest that the Southern Baptist churches would have a greater number of new members in comparison to other denominations. Southern Baptists are distinguished by many historians as the leaders in evangelistic zeal.

Number of Baptisms

In the study, the church that baptized 106 people only grew its church membership by twenty-three people. The church with 120 baptisms only increased the membership by twenty-

six people. The model church also had 120 baptisms but increased the membership by 384 persons. The other baptism records are shown in Table 3.2. As such, it appears that there is no direct parallel between the number of baptisms and the number of people willing to make the church membership commitment and come into covenantal relationship with other Christians. New believers need the wisdom, guidance, and the spiritual nurture of the full body of Christ. As with any other organization, when an individual chooses not to make a commitment, the benefit that could have been received is forfeited. However, no one should forfeit the benefit of the full body of Christ. It is difficult to understand why someone could be baptized and not be encouraged to join the church in such vast numbers.

Table 3.2 Number of Baptisms between January 2010 and December 2014

45	40	120	50	25	23	120	106	30	20
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Delegation of Follow-Up

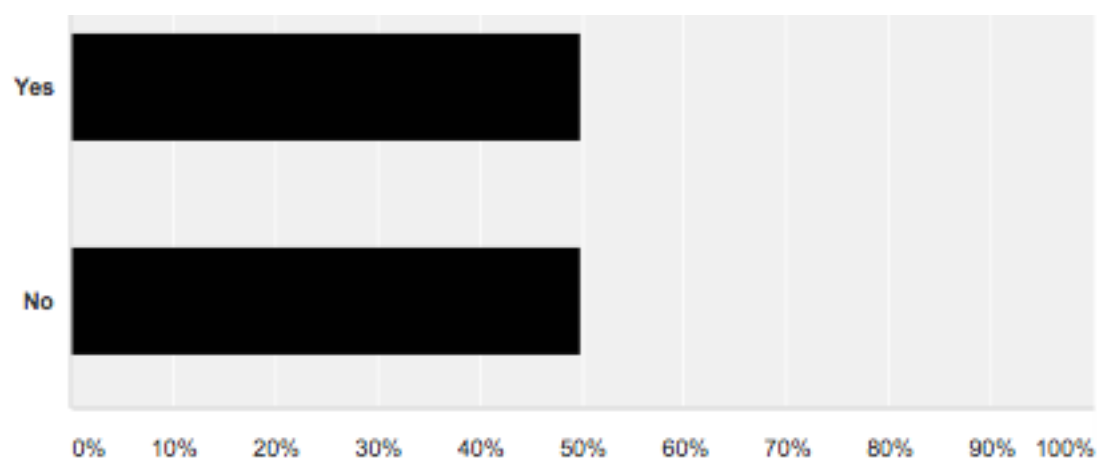
There are numerous ways a church might effectively assign follow-up responsibilities among its staff and volunteers. The results of this study showed that whether the follow-up was assigned to one person or multiple people did not affect the church's ability to connect with guests over time and move them to membership. Either an entire staff is responsible for this task, or there may be one specific staff member designated for follow-up. The designated person may be a lay leader in the church, a group leader, or a group member. All of these methods were mentioned by the surveyed churches.

The church leaders surveyed were split evenly as to whether one person was responsible or if it was divided among many people (Figure 3.3). This is positive, as it shows that whatever

system is used, one person, or many persons, the church can reach people if the proper system is in place. The proper system is for a church to pursue first-time guests as if they were not Christians. When a church views everyone as potentially needing salvation and the benefits that come from aligning with the local church, both the local church and the kingdom of God see numerical and spiritual growth, which is the goal of the Christian life. Christ is glorified when his people are soul-winners.

Figure 3.3 Delegation of Guest Follow-Up

Is one person on your church staff or in your church membership assigned to see that all guests are contacted?



Factors in Multiplying Membership

If none of above-mentioned factors determines church growth, what does? Analysis of the data in this research revealed that church growth occurs and is sustained through having a system of intentional follow-up and a tenacity to prevent people from existing in anonymity at church.

The model church uses a closely monitored, effective system to ensure that new visitors at the church are contacted and guided through the process of becoming a Christian and a

member of the church. The model church assigns both professional staff and lay leadership to guest follow-up. When information is received about a guest, the information is given to the membership coordinator, who sends it to the associate pastor. The associate pastor e-mails the other staff the information on the new guest and the staff brings the information into the staff meeting. The guests are discussed by name in the meeting to see if interaction took place with the guest at the event where the information was received. If a staff member did make contact with the guest, the staff member is assigned the guest for follow-up. If no one did, then the age of the guest will be critical in determining which staff member is assigned for follow-up.

The staff member is assigned to perform three functions. The first is to contact the first-time guest and to have a church member make contact as well. After contact is made, any information about the contact is to be sent back to the membership coordinator to be recorded into the file that was started for the guest. Depending on the conversation, this information may include how the guest heard about the church, who the guest attended with, whether they attended a small group, or if the guest intended to return for another visit. Recording this information is vital, as it will determine the flow of the conversation when the next person contacts the guest. Each church membership prospect is contacted weekly for a month, then biweekly for a month, and then quarterly until a decision about salvation or membership is made. During these follow-up communications, the notes on each previous conversation become vital in building rapport and relationship with the guest. While in-person contact should be attempted, texting, e-mailing, and mailing are also useful forms of communication. Keeping contact with guests is the key to moving them toward church membership.

As previously been mentioned, the importance of church membership should be discussed every weekend through the pulpit, through Bible study groups, and church

communications. Accordingly, when the church has a new member class or newcomers' event, every non-member should be invited. It is also the task of the staff to have lay members and group members invite guests to group mission projects and church fellowship opportunities. A slogan that has been coined at the model church is this: "Invite everyone, to everything, every time."

More broadly, four themes emerged from the study that indicate a positive influence on church growth: immediacy in follow-up, maintaining a list of church membership prospects, enrollment of new members in small groups, and persistence in follow-up. Each will be discussed in greater detail below.

Urgency in Follow-Up

When answering the question, "How long does it take for the church to contact a visitor?" a Southern Baptist pastor answered, "Within a day or two." This pastor also charges a deacon to the initial follow-up and then the task is assigned to a staff member. This same pastor indicates that the church has only one person assigned to follow up with guests multiple times, but in his response to another question, he indicated the church only contacts guests once. This specific church has good intentions, but its follow-up system has not been evaluated for improvement. Unsurprisingly, the system was not effective in achieving its aims. There are certainly guests who were not contacted because it is not clear to the staff or the deacon board who is responsible for guest follow-up.

The churches surveyed reported taking anywhere from hours to weeks before a guest is contacted, including some who makes no contact with guests. The church that takes weeks to follow up with guests had twenty baptisms over a five-year period. This is also a church where there is not a master list of prospects and first-time guests are only contacted once, according to

pastor. The church saw very few new members. Another pastor responded that the plan was to contact guests “within a day or two” after the guest visits the church. The same pastor leads a church that only contacts guests once. This church does not keep a master list of potential church members and only grew by thirty-four people in the five-year period studied. Another pastor answered that it takes “weeks” for his church to contact first-time guests. This pastor only recorded twenty baptisms between 2010 and 2014 and had a decrease of church membership. This church had twenty-three new members over the course of five years. Considering all churches in the study have similar membership numbers but others reported greater growth, these churches’ follow-up systems warrant evaluation and adjustment.

The trend in the research seems to be that no matter how much time elapses between a guest’s visit and the follow-up, maintaining contact with guests until a commitment is made to join the church makes the difference for substantial church growth.

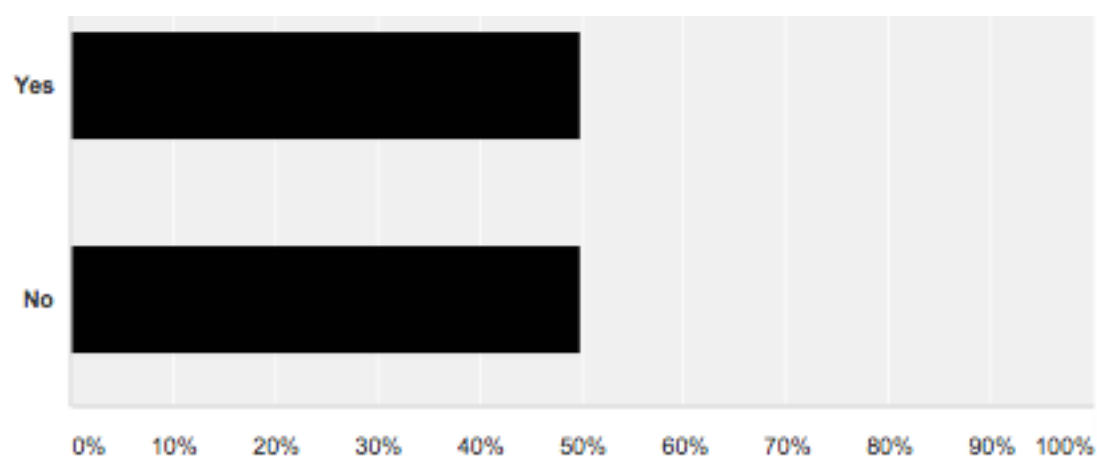
Church Prospect List

At the model church, there is a list of church prospects that is handed out at every staff meeting and reviewed by the staff, but almost fifty percent of the surveyed churches do not (Figure 3.4). This review keeps the staff accountable for the people God has brought to the church. It is obvious that God is responsible for moving people to commit to Him and to the church, but God has called the church and individual Christians to be partners in that process. The staff reviews the list of prospects and asks questions about the prospects and where they are in the follow-up process. The list is also a visual reminder when it is time to contact a guest on the list who may not have had contact from the church in a few weeks. Periodically, the staff is reminded to ask the guests at the end of the conversation, “May I ask you a question? Out of curiosity, if God moved in your heart on Sunday and you wanted to join the church, would you

know what to do?” It is surprising how many church visitors answer this question negatively. This question gives the pastor or church leader an open door for sharing both how to join the church and how someone can be saved. It would be a terrible scenario if guests were ready to join the church, but have not been encouraged to, or informed for how to do so.

Figure 3.4 Master List of Church Prospects

Does your church keep a master list of church prospects?



Enrollment in Small Groups

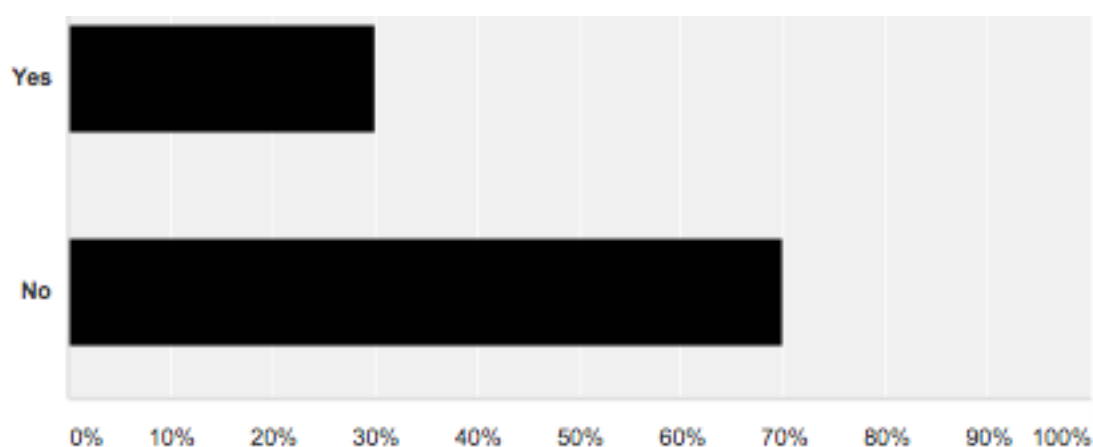
Groups are the key to spiritual growth and perseverance in the faith. However, only thirty percent of surveyed churches automatically enroll new members into a Bible study group (Figure 3.5). However, whether a church enrolls new members into a Bible study does not appear to influence its ability to expand its membership.

New members to Bible studies are not always Christians, and one of the goals of a Bible study class is to challenge unbelievers with the gospel. Once an individual has prayed to receive Christ, the small group family should then influence the new believer to make the commitment public through baptism. The new member process at a church should be graded partially on the number of baptisms it records. The auto-enroll policy for new members in a Bible study class has

helped the model church grow substantially over the five-year period researched. This alone, however, does not increase the number of new members because three of the other churches in the study also auto-enroll new members but did not see substantial increase in membership numbers.

Figure 3.5 New Member Enrollment in Small Groups

Are new church members automatically enrolled into a small group Bible study?



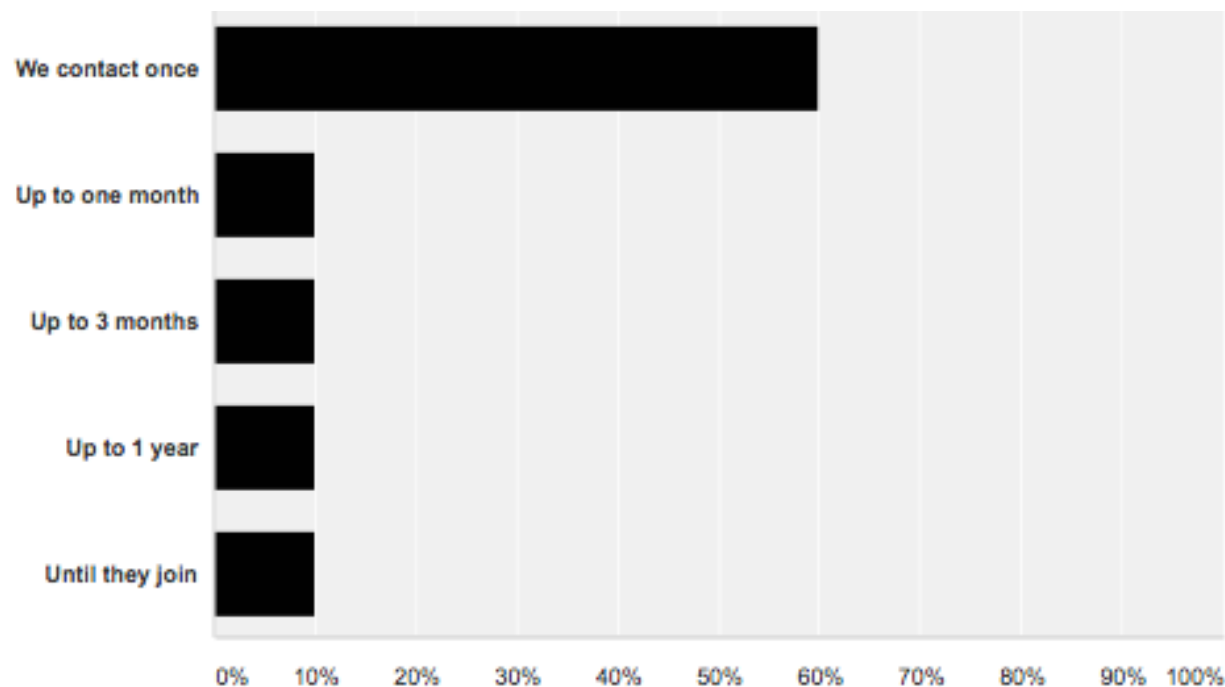
Persistence in Follow-Up

The conclusion in the research is churches maintaining communication with guests until they join will be the churches seeing church membership growth and increasing the number of people committing to one another in church membership however, among the surveyed churches, only one, the model church, continues to contact guests until they join (Figure 3.6). The model church has grown the membership substantially, adding 384 new members from 2010 to 2014. The persistence in follow-up distinguished the model church from the other churches in the survey, although many grew during the five-year period studied and share many characteristics

and beliefs. This persistence is possible in part because the model church maintains a master list of church membership prospects.

Figure 3.6 Frequency of Follow-Up after First Visit

How often do you contact visitors after their first visit?



Summary

The full value of the research should be seen in a broad context. The model church not only contacted first-time guests until they decided to join the church or asked to be removed from the prospect list, but the model church also carried out other steps to double its church membership: the church followed up on every guest until the guest joined the church, communicated the importance of membership in many ways and in many venues, provided multiple opportunities to join the church body, informed the church of the new members in a celebratory fashion, and assimilated all new members into a small group for spiritual

nourishment, personal accountability, and prayer support. If the model church had overlooked any of these steps, it might not have seen the same results in the growth of membership.

Chapter four will provide an in-depth review of the model church's process of moving first-time guests into church members. As with any process, each organization must determine it fits into its culture and the personalities of its members. The steps indicated in chapter four represent a model that has produced numerical growth in membership, small groups, and baptisms and can be modified and adopted for any church family to fulfill the Great Commission.

CHAPTER 4

A MODEL FOR INCREASING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The church is God's plan to reach the world for Christ, and this plan can only be accomplished if the church is healthy. Healthy churches should be growing in membership because Jesus promised He would build the church. "Building" the church means adding people to the church membership. There are at least two ways in which a numerically growing church may respond to its growth: humility toward the gospel for the growth or a sense of worldly pride. When a church responds in the latter manner, the leadership or the congregation becomes boastful about the growth, but humility is the spiritually healthy response.

However, even absent growth, a church can become proud, priding itself in an empty auditorium and justifying the low attendance with the notion that it is because "the Word of God is being preached here." Churches that self-vindicate their laziness in outreach believe that growing churches are somehow compromising the gospel. Contrary to that misguided belief, churches can grow in numbers and influence without compromising the message of Jesus. Not all Christ-centered churches are sparsely attended and not all heretical churches are at full capacity. God is the one who brings the increase. The local church is called to invest in the people God brings into its sphere of influence.

The writer reviewed Scripture and saw that when the seeds of the gospel were sown, people were converted and the New Testament church grew in the gospel numerically and in influence on the culture. Growing in the gospel means the church is meeting its purposes as designed by God. First Baptist Church of Venice is a thriving environment where a church's purposes are being fulfilled in a healthy system. As the reader will discover, First Baptist Church of Venice is not a perfect church, but it is a place where unity is displayed and the congregation

is in agreement that the gospel is the center of the church's existence. This sense of purpose is what motivates people like Iola, a retired widow, to make phone calls to the people on the church roll who have not attended church for a year. This sense of purpose is what motivates a group of men and women to maintain the landscaping of a twenty-acre land the church purchased and uses for sports ministry for the children of Venice. The sense of purpose is what motivates two women to spend one hour every Sunday praying for the worship service for a year. This sense of purpose compels a retired police officer to work with the senior adults in the church. This sense of purpose presses a member named Krista to make hundreds of visits each year to homebound members. This sense of purpose is what motivates a retired military officer to help people across the street in the blistering hot Florida summer.

First Baptist Church of Venice knows the task of the New Testament church is to reach people for Christ and to minister and encourage those in the family of God. This is done through community outreach, foreign missions, investing in neighbors, feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and visiting nursing homes and prisons. These ministries are happening as Christ commanded the church, but He also would not have a church ignore the lost that walk through the doors of the church building. The writer of Hebrews even encourages us to remember, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."¹ Every Sunday is an opportunity to make a new disciple or to connect with a Christian who is visiting the church worship service for the first time since moving to a new city. The goal of every church is to bring people closer to God and to His people. Ultimately, all people, everywhere, should be offered the opportunity to commit to Christ and to His church.

¹ Hebrews 13:2.

Even though First Baptist Church of Venice is a church with an older congregation and now has a very limited scope of what changes might be needed for the future, the church membership is open to new ideas while being trusting of the current leadership and committed to being evangelistic. For change to happen, however, there needs to be a good reason for the changes to take place. The most recent changes have been the purchase of property for a second location and the main campus remodel, including significant areas of the church building. The second location is used for many events in the community, at which events First Baptist would collect names of potential prospects. First Baptist also recently voted to call a full-time minister of worship arts and to call a full-time sports and small groups pastor. The church currently has two styles of worship, traditional and the other contemporary. The church combines for a blended service in the summer.

First Baptist Venice is searching for a small groups pastor because the church is looking to expand its small group ministry. In the past the church has focused on Sunday School as the primary discipleship opportunity, but it has now embraced an additional emphasis on small group ministry after the congregation realized that ministry also needs to take place outside the church walls. Currently, eighty percent of the church's worship attendance also attends Sunday school. These Sunday school attenders and the small groups that meet during the week together represent a larger group of people than there are in worship gatherings. The church would be considered traditional, but understands outreach needs to happen in the community. The membership has embraced this and expressed their support by making a considerable financial investment into the ministry. The future of the church's small group ministry can only occur if small groups meet outside of the church building as the church has no more space for additional Sunday school classes. An off-campus model also provides members the opportunity to invite a

friend or neighbor to a more casual “get together” at a home rather than an invitation to “church.” It is the vision of the associate pastor of First Baptist that every person in Venice and the surrounding area be invited to a small group hosted by a member of First Baptist Church of Venice.

God’s intention is for the church to grow and flourish into a large multi-faceted ministry structure, where personal spiritual gifts are used to bring about change in the hearts of His people. The structure and systems, however, must encourage Christians to become more like Christ in their daily lives and to engage in ministry, rather than merely watching ministry take place. For an older congregation to be encouraged to look to the future is one way Christ molds people into His image. Change is difficult, and a sign of Christian growth is to watch how some individual Christians respond when things begin to change in the church. Even though Christians believe the flesh has been put to death, the flesh can still rage to resurrect; this is often seen in the church family when new ways of doing ministry arrive. The congregation of First Baptist Church of Venice is aware of this fact and embraces changes that further the gospel. Living like Christ means Christians should worship together publicly and privately, serve the church body, give financially to the church, share the gospel with others, lead others to discipleship, and be ready to let go of anything hindering the spreading of the gospel. The existence of these characteristics indicates a spiritually mature church family.

The Western culture’s traditional view of Christianity expects full-time ministers to focus on the teaching of the Word, prayer, and developing lay leaders who volunteer time to make the church all she can be for a given group of Christians and community. However, many now desire to use the discipleship method as taught in the Scripture rather than allow the Christian sub-

culture to dictate church expectations. According to Acts, at her conception the church grew quickly and flourished using the multiplication model of discipleship.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?” Peter [said] to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.²

It may be argued that a healthy church model was given to the church in Matthew 28:16–20. A careful reading indicates that Jesus told His followers what to do for the local church to succeed by fulfilling the Great Commission. The Book of Acts also lists what is necessary to reach every portion of the world for Christ. Jesus promised His followers power from on high, He promised to give Christians the words to speak, He promised to give the church financial means, and He promised to give the church a peaceable Spirit to keep the unity required to take the gospel to the world. Jesus’ plan is for Christians to have the fortitude to share the gospel. Relationships are the key to sharing the gospel the way Christ did. Waggoner writes, “We mature as Christians as we build relationships with other believers. First, we enter the cornerstone relationship, an intimate dependence on Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us to become one with Jesus. . . . Next, build significant, intimate relationships with other believers.”³ This chapter is dedicated to explaining the five practical steps every church can take to increase the number of true disciples committed to one another for spiritual growth and accountability.

² Acts 2:37–47.

³ Brad J. Waggoner, *The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: B&H Pub. Group, 2008), 232.

Follow Up on Every Guest

The first step to increase church membership is following up on first-time guests with the intention of moving them toward making a commitment to the family of God. Intention is paramount in kingdom growth. The goal of follow-up is not simply to say, “Thank you for coming,” or to find out if the guest enjoyed the service, or even to see if the guest has any questions. Even though these conversations are important, the goal of the follow-up is to guide guests into the system where they will be confronted with the gospel, repent of sin, and join the church. During follow-up, every staff or church member involved must be focused on this ultimate goal, for the guest to hear the gospel, respond to the gospel, and the proclaim the gospel with other like-minded believers. All efforts in church growth must be centered on a redeemed membership. Again, it cannot be overstated that the goal of church growth is not a longer membership roll, but rather to grow the kingdom of God and move people into authentic relationships based on mutual submission and accountability to the spiritual disciplines within the context of the local church. Given this aim, a church cannot become infatuated with making people feel “at home” without having the goal of discovering an individual’s status in the eyes of God.

Each guest visiting First Baptist of Venice for Sunday worship service is asked to fill out an information card, which is attached to the bulletin. At every church event outside of regularly scheduled worship services, staff or church members will have an information form that guests are required to fill out to attend the event. Thus, for every Bible study, youth event, children’s event, community outreach event such as church’s Costume Carnival or sports ministry, the church collects information about each participant. These names are immediately added to several lists.

The first list that guest names are placed on is a list maintained by the pastoral staff for each individual. The names on this list are typically divided by age. The children's director is given the names of the adults who have children. The student minister is given names of adults with teenage children. The names of adults without children are given to the senior pastor, associate pastor, and the church's business administrator. The names of retired adults are given to the senior adult director. If a guest is under eighteen, it is asked that the children's pastor and youth pastor obtain permission from the teen's parents before making contact. This ensures that no accusations would be made against the staff members for inappropriate digital contact. This policy protects both the student and the staff.

Contacting the guest can take the form of any or all of these methods: texts, Facebook, e-mail, phone calls, and notes. Where no information is given except a name on the information card, the staff members are advised to search Facebook for the person and send them a private message to see if this was the individual who visited the church. Remembering the goal is to understand the guest's spiritual life, the first contact or phone call may be similar to this: "Hello Bob, this is Pastor Chris from First Baptist. Thank you for visiting with us on Sunday. How did you hear about the church? Do you have any friends that attend here?" Questions like these can go a long way in determining the spiritual background of the guest. A typical response given by the guest is this: "Thank you for reaching out to us, Pastor Chris. We have been members of the All Souls Church for thirty-five years and recently there have been some changes that we have not agreed with so we visited First Baptist of Venice on Sunday." This specific response informed the contact-initiator many things. First, the pastor found out that the guests have been in Venice for at least thirty-five years and are not snowbirds. Secondly, they are coming from another evangelical church and are likely to have been baptized by immersion after salvation.

These are very important facts when the pastor meets with them about membership in the church. This simple two-minute exchange between a pastor and a guest has given potentially invaluable information to the pastor. If the text and/or e-mail by the pastoral staff member does not receive a response from the guest, the pastoral staff member is to call the guest and try to make contact. As with any spiritual endeavor, the premise is that each Christian should be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This writer has often felt led to invite certain church guests to lunch where a relationship is formed that extends for years. However, the writer does not feel that way about all guests; each individual making contacts with guests needs to rely on the voice of the Holy Spirit. Whatever the choice of contact, the point is to make an intentional decision to aggressively follow up with every single guest without missing a single opportunity to reach out to people visiting the church. After God led guests into the specific church worship environment, it seems a minimal request from the Lord for us to reach out to them in attempt to engage them with the gospel.

Every attempt at a contact must be documented so that the next person attempting to make contact knows the results of the previous conversation. It may be a phone call in which the guests indicate they would not be back in town for another six months. When making the next contact, the caller knows not to invite the guest to Bible study that would begin next week. If the caller makes the error of mentioning this Bible study, the guest might have the impression that the church leadership never talks to one another or that the church is too big to know much about the membership. Conversely, if the caller expresses knowledge about what the guest had previously informed the church, the guest is made to feel that the church cares deeply about the membership and remembers details about members' lives.

Another step in reaching out to church membership prospects is to engage the church's lay leadership in this effort. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he states clearly that pastors are to train church members and release them to do the work of the ministry.⁴ Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson state, "The health of your church is not just about the numbers. It's about the movement of people toward Christ, toward deep love for God and a genuine love for others."⁵ The key to knowing whether leaders in the church are mature followers of Christ is recognizing the love leaders have for the things Jesus loves. Jesus loves people and mature Christian leaders will love people too. This love is manifested in pursuing the souls of people and pressing each new believer to use the spiritual gifts God gives at conversion. This is one of the reasons First Baptist Church of Venice asks small group leaders to contact visitors. Dave Earley states that it is a basic function of group leaders to invite new people to the group every week.⁶ Whether the group leader recognizes it or not, the group leader has started the discipleship process with the potential church member. If the guest accepts the invitation to attend the small group Bible study and later joins the church, the guest has experienced first-hand how to invite new people into the group. By setting the example in this way, the multiplication of small groups becomes easier. Asking group leaders to contact guests allows the group leader to partially take on the role of a pastor, thus fulfilling the mandate for churches to multiply leaders and for church members to use spiritual gifts given at the moment of salvation. Creating new groups with new leaders requires the church leadership, both professional and volunteer, to model ministry to new people. Earley writes, "God can use you to multiply leaders. But you

⁴ Ephesians 4:11–13.

⁵ Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, Eric Arnson, and Bill Hybels, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 18.

⁶ Dave Earley, *Turning Members into Leaders: How to Raise Up Your Group Members to Lead New Groups* (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2001), 30.

must use the power of demonstration. You have to model the habits and characteristics, and you must show them how to do the skills.”⁷ The desire to make disciples and to train church members and prospects is the overflowing of the Holy Spirit.

The longer a newcomer maintains a relationship with a few people from the church, the more likely the individual is to eventually join the church. This writer does not suggest that every prospect be called weekly, but simply that the relationship is continued even if the person initially chooses not to make a commitment to the church. Often, God seems to move in the visitor’s heart after some time with the conviction to join other believers in church membership.

To keep each church membership prospect connected to the church, First Baptist Church of Venice adds each guest to the Constant Contact weekly e-mail and any e-mails that advertise an age-appropriate ministry opportunity relevant to that guest. The church is very careful not to inundate members or guests with too many e-mails. A general rule is for both members and guests to receive two e-mails a week from the church. The goal of the e-mails is to invite the guest to every church-wide event, to keep contact with the guest, and to provide another opportunity for the guest to communicate vital information to the church. Constant Contact has as “opt out” feature allowing a person on an e-mail distribution list to request to be removed. When this happens, the church reviews the individual’s giving and attendance records. If there is no attendance or giving record for six weeks or more, then the church assumes the individual would no longer like to be contacted by the church. The name is removed from the prospect reports given to the staff and the lay leader is informed. Removing the name of the person may seem extreme, but church errs on the side of caution, not desiring to overreach the boundaries of

⁷ Ibid., 32.

individual's personal space. If the guest returns to the church, the name is added again to the prospect list but not the Constant Contact list.

As noted above, the key to this system is that all information about each individual be noted in the database so that each documented contact can be used to reach the person for Christ. The more information on an individual is available, the more likely each call will have the intended impact. Knowing the details of the guest's life and spiritual journey can make the ministering to the individual more successful. Without two people getting to know each other over time, it is doubtful true disciple-making will take place. If true disciple-making is not taking place, then the church has failed. As Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson indicate, "Disciple-making isn't a peripheral activity; it is essential activity. If you aren't inviting people to a consistent life-practice of yoking themselves to Jesus, you aren't doing what we are meant to be doing. Our job personally and corporately is to live in, out, and from God in Christ and to become more and more like him."⁸ Involving the most people in the most ministries where the most spiritual gifts can be used effectively is the biblical model for church growth.

Communicate the Importance of Church Membership

If the local church genuinely believes in the mission of the church, each church should be consistently communicating the Scriptural mandate for every Christian to be committed to one another in the context of the church body. The first place this should be communicated is through the pulpit and teaching of the pastor at a church. Every formal church gathering should allow guests the opportunity to commit to the church. Whether this is to be done through a traditional altar call or on paper, guests should have the opportunity to communicate their desire to join the

⁸ Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 159.

church. Remembering this process is used as an opportunity to inquire, on paper or in person, about the spiritual condition of the potential member, the person should be contacted as soon as possible after the visit.

Small groups are also another place where the importance of church membership should be discussed, as it naturally appears in the text that the teachers discuss. Since the small group is a place where the details of group members' personal struggles and the trials of life are often brought to the forefront, church membership as a means of communal support will come up naturally and should be encouraged with biblical confidence.

It seems to this writer that every church gathering should offer an opportunity for people to hear about church membership in a formal setting. By formal the writer means a scheduled date and time to meet with people about church membership. First Baptist Venice calls the meeting "First Step." First Step is promoted as a class about church information and membership. If a guest was interested in becoming a member of the church, the class suffices as the required new member class. However, if a guest simply wants to know about the church, then the class covers answers to questions about the mission and the vision of First Baptist Church of Venice. The class explores the history of the Christian church, the history of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the history and future of First Baptist Church of Venice. After hitting several doctrinal key points in the Baptist Faith and Message, the end of the class is reserved for a gospel presentation. The leader of the class goes around the room and asks each attender to share their personal story about receiving Christ as Savior and Lord. This conclusion to the class is usually very emotional and creates a spiritual bond amongst those present. This process has led many people to receiving Christ in front of a group of other Christians. All efforts to bring people into church membership should have the goal of finding out whether the individuals are Christians

and give the opportunity to repent and believe. Giving this opportunity in front of a larger group of believers can be an emotional and deeply meaningful experience. The reason each potential new church member is asked publicly about a personal relationship with Christ is biblical, as taught by Roy Fish, former Professor of Evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁹ Fish writes that both Old Testament and New Testament are full of examples of people coming to God publicly in repentance and faith; in fact, Fish believes the whole Bible is an example of a public invitation to come to Christ.¹⁰ After each person shares a personal testimony of faith in Christ, an opportunity is given to the Christians to join First Baptist of Venice. All those joining the church on that day fill out the appropriate paperwork and have individual pictures taken. The picture is used to introduce the new member to the church congregation. The church will publicly affirm that Jesus is growing His church by bringing in new members to assist in spreading the gospel. When the new members are introduced to the congregation, this group of people may choose to walk in together as a sign of unity, support, and closeness with their new brothers and sisters in Christ. The newest Christians consider this to be a special moment.

The church staff and lay leadership are asked to promote the First Step class with the prospects they contact weekly, rather than sitting back and “hoping” that people will attend. During the week, the administrative assistants call guests and invite them to the class. Also, the class is mentioned during the announcement time in the Sunday services, in the weekly e-mails titled “Around First,” and a personal e-mail sent by the senior pastor to each prospect in the Constant Contact database. The church staff has a spreadsheet of every prospect and the progress

⁹ Roy Fish, *Coming to Jesus: Giving a Good Invitation* (Fort Worth, Texas: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

made in becoming members. The spreadsheet is a compilation of every step a prospect must complete to become a member of the church. There are seventeen steps on the spreadsheet:

Table 4:1. Prospect to Membership Spreadsheet

1.	Name of the prospect
2.	Date the prospect requested membership (this keeps the staff accountable to move the person as quickly as possible through the process once church membership requirements are met)
3.	Photograph taken
4.	Information entered into the church data software (Shelby)
5.	Type of decision the person made (statement of faith, transfer of letter, profession of faith and baptism, WatchCare, Steps Toward Jesus)
6.	Baptism counseling date scheduled
7.	Baptism counseling completed
8.	Baptism date scheduled
9.	Baptism completed
10.	Baptism certificate mailed
11.	Letter from previous church requested
12.	Letter from previous church received
13.	Presented to the congregation
14.	Church database updated to reflect membership
15.	Status changed in Constant Contact from prospect to member
16.	Member assigned a deacon
17.	Member assigned to a Bible study group if not already attending one

This comprehensive list is the responsibility of several people in the church office and is reviewed regularly to ensure that no one is being overlooked in the process of becoming connected to the most valuable organization on earth.

Along with the First Step class, First Baptist also offers other opportunities for people to give testimony of faith in Jesus and to share the desire to join His church. “Join the Church Sunday,” done incorrectly, could be perceived as another gimmick to enroll people as members of the church; however, done correctly and with the motive of discovering the spiritual condition of a person’s heart, this ministry can reap great spiritual fruit. The precept of a redeemed church membership is taken for granted and church membership can be given to those who are not saved

or at least are not pursuing holiness. The holiness of Christ's church should be the highest priority for any church. Paige Patterson writes, "much of the responsibility for the failure of the modern church in this area [holiness] is due merely to our losing a concept of the holiness of God and of the importance of a pure church consisting of persons who are determined to do all that they can to keep the bride of Christ pure against the day of her presentation."¹¹ Join the Church Sunday occurs once a year in March. For six weeks prior to Join the Church Sunday, church membership is discussed from the pulpit, in small group Bible studies, and to each church prospect targeted to consider joining the church. The staff and volunteers are asked to make phone calls to the prospects and extend a personal invitation to meet with the pastor before the service on that Sunday. A breakfast is served on Join the Church Sunday, and the pastor comes into the room and shares the gospel with those gathered. If the prospects can give a faith testimony regarding Jesus, membership cards are filled out and pictures of the new members are taken. The group is asked to walk forward at the end of the service and share with the pastor the decision to join the church. As always, special care is taken to be sure the gospel is fully understood and the requirements of the church are fulfilled through baptism and the First Step class. Join the Church Sunday is volunteer-heavy and an opportunity to involve the lay leadership of the church.

Another opportunity related to moving people to the decision to join the church is an event called "Dinner with the Pastor." Staff and church volunteers contact the people on the prospect lists and makes an invitation to Dinner with the Pastor. Invitations are also sent to prospects via a church worship service announcement, text, phone calls, Facebook, and the weekly bulletin. Guests can sign up for the dinner on a tear-out sheet in the bulletin, as well as by

¹¹ Patterson, *The Troubled and Triumphant Church*, 81.

calling the church office or responding on the church website.¹² Any method of communication advertising the event should call for an action step by the guest. Communication without a call to action must not be an option. Kelvin Co of the Center for Church Communication states that regardless of the size of the church, the worship style of the church, or the technology used by the church, writing announcements is a vital communication function because the main purpose of the announcement is to get people to respond to the opportunity and not just have information about it.¹³ It is important to note the responsibility to invite people is on the church membership, but if guests decide to sign up of their own initiative, it is certainly acceptable. The event is publicized on posters, on television monitors around the church, and in the weekly e-blast sent to the church family.¹⁴

After the number of attenders is determined, the staff decides how many church members are needed as volunteers. There should be a one-to-one ratio between guests and members, which keeps the energy of the event at an expected level. One writer states that guests, even though new to the church, can feel the “energy of the room” and will adjust their energy accordingly.¹⁵ The evening begins at 5:30 p.m. for staff, 5:45 p.m. for members, and 6:00 p.m. for guests. Nametags are provided and are color-coded to easily distinguish church members and prospects. The members wear blue nametags and the prospects wear red nametags. The associate pastor leads the members in prayer and reviews the evening, reminding members the goal of the event and

¹² Christopher S. Cornette, "A Leadership Model Project" (LEAD 810-Strategies for Developing Leaders), Liberty University, October 2015.

¹³ Center for Church Communications, *Dangerous: A Go-To Guide for Church Communication*, edited by Kevin D. Hendricks, Cleve Peasinger, and Chuck Scoggins (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Church Communication, 2013), 48–50.

¹⁴ Cornette, “A Leadership Model Project.”

¹⁵ Jonathan Malm, *Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Visitors* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Church Communication, 2014), 88.

processes that will be used to share the gospel and to lead a Christian guest into church membership. The following is a sample taken from the training manual for Dinner with the Pastor at the model church regarding how to plan the evening and carry out this ministry evening effectively. First a church needs to identify a night of the week that works for a specific community of people. For instance, a city where high school sports are popular amongst the citizens should not choose a Friday night to have a church outreach event. Secondly, a target group should be chosen. This will help identify the type of music to be played, volume of the music and even the type of food to be served. Thirdly, it is imperative to identify the number of leaders required. The church staff should be included in this number. Lay leaders will function as table co-hosts along with the paid staff. There will be a need for a check-in volunteer, a membership picture table volunteer, children's ministry childcare workers, kitchen volunteers, and table servers.

Fourthly, there is a need to identify communication outlets. The model church uses postcard invitation sent to all prospects over the last three months. An e-blast to prospects over the last three months are sent as well. The church also utilizes phone call from a ministry staff person to all membership prospects. There is also a pulpit announcement three weeks prior to Dinner with the Pastor. Sign-ups are taken on website, in the lobby, by personal call, social media, text, or in-person invitation.

Fifthly, the evening's agenda is planned by the staff and volunteers. A typical agenda has the attenders signing in and mingling from 6:00 p.m. to 6:20 p.m. Sign-in takes place in the room where the dinner will be hosted. The church staff and spouses are required no later than 5:30 p.m. to receive guests and volunteers. It is critical for the paid church staff to be the examples of timeliness. This is also crucial to represent a critical mass welcoming our guests.

The table co-hosts should be present no later than 5:45 p.m. while the childcare workers should arrive by 5:30 p.m. Church members will wear blue nametags and prospects will wear red nametags. This is so the church members can differentiate the other members from guests and spend time talking with them. A music CD plays in dining area while the mingling is taking place. The music is to be celebratory not contemplative. The right music sets a tone for cheerfulness in the room. The Appetizers are served at 6:00 p.m. At 6:20 p.m., the groups move to the dinner tables. Dinner will be served from a team organized and trained as the hospitality team.¹⁶

After dinner, the senior pastor will share the First Baptist Church's vision and purpose. This is important information for those guests who are already Christians and are looking for a new church home, but this portion of the evening is secondary to the gospel proclamation. After that, the pastor will share with the guests that the church is thankful for their attendance and that no one is there by chance. The pastor will invite anyone wanting to join the church to do so right now. The preparation for this defining moment is through dinner conversation and the information previously disclosed through prior contact, which allows each table host to discover the spiritual condition of each guest at the table. The table host knows whether each individual needs to be saved, needs to be baptized, or is following the Lord. Armed with this information the table host can engage the guests with either an offer to join the church or an offer to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. The information to fill out membership cards, baptism scheduling cards, etc., will be available to the co-hosts and already at the center of the dinner table. If someone at the table joins, the new member will do so by salvation and baptism (they accepted Christ that night), baptism (are a Christian and need biblical baptism), statement of faith (from

¹⁶ Ibid.

another denomination that teaches salvation by faith alone and the guest has been baptized by immersion), or by transfer of letter from another Southern Baptist Church. If the guest decides to join the First Baptist Church of Venice family that evening, the table host prays a prayer of thanksgiving with the new member for the decision and then bring the guest to a dedicated spot where a picture is taken for the introduction to the congregation. There will also be an information table set up if the new member is desirous of information about Sunday school and other church ministries. Again, it must be stated that the goal is to have each staff member recruit, train, and disciple the church members so the body of Christ is ready to lead guests to Christ, as well as to invest in the seeker before the conversion and to disciple the new believer afterwards. This is only one example of how a staff member has this opportunity. A typical event like Dinner with the Pastor is described in the timeline below.

The room can be arranged formally or informally depending upon the congregation. This writer suggests using round tables, which are more conducive to conversation. An event like this can also be held in a home living room or other places much less formal. Each event should have trained hosts and the co-hosts present at every table or at every event depending on the location. Each pastor should train the co-hosts so they know what is expected at each table (no one should say “I did not know that.”). This training is also a wonderful opportunity to disciple Christians in the work of the Holy Spirit and prayer as He will be working at the tables when the gospel is shared and the believers are praying.

Signage should be placed at the entrances to the parking lot, building, sign-in table, information table, dinner tables, and the childcare area. The guests should not have to wonder where to go or what to do. Regarding effective church signage, Malm writes, “Be generous with your signage. Let people know where to park. Let them know where to enter. Where the

restrooms are. Where to check their kids in. Anywhere you can possibly guess a visitor will go, make signage that directs them around. Put it at eye level and make it clear and bright.”¹⁷ All obstacles should be anticipated and removed so the guest walks into the room comfortable and with all defenses down.

An event like Dinner with the Pastor begins when members and guests gather for hors d'oeuvres. After checking in at a table and receiving a nametag, the attenders walk into a large room where pleasant music is played and tables are prepared nicely. The church will also occasionally have live music. During this time, the blue name tag attenders (church members) actively seek out red nametag attenders (guests) to make conversation. After fifteen minutes of talking and mingling, each attender finds their assigned seat. At this point the church members make conversation with the guests to find out where they are spiritually. This is done discreetly using a great amount of wisdom and prayer, through questions such as “How long have you been coming to our church?” “How did you hear about the church?” Also, questions such as “So, did you grow up in church?” allow members to find out as much as possible about the guests’ spiritual background. The conversation should be natural. After dinner, dessert, and a time for conversation, the pastor gets up and tells attenders about the church. He discusses the history of the church and its future goals. The pastor will close with a statement like this,

First Baptist is a great church because the church is serving a great King. That King is Jesus. Jesus is the most important Person at this church. Our leadership believes, based on the Word of God, that all people must come to Jesus for forgiveness and salvation. Jesus is the only way to God. Now the evening is going to be returned over to the table hosts and if it is okay, the table hosts would like to ask a personal question if this is okay with you? Thank you for coming and for being here tonight. It has been a great privilege.

¹⁷ Malm, *Unwelcome*, 24.

The table host then asks a question like this, “There has been a lot of talk tonight about personal lives, families, and careers, but there is one question that is more important than any other. If you died tonight do you know for sure you would go to heaven?” The table host listens for a faith answer, and if one is given then the member might say, “You know that is exactly what the Bible says. How are you feeling about church membership? Do you feel the Lord leading you to join our church? You do? That’s great! You can do that right now by filling out this card and letting us get a picture of you.” At First Baptist Church of Venice, more than half of all guests at Dinner with the Pastor receive Christ for the first time or join the church during this event.¹⁸

An opportunity is afforded guests at a similar event called Dessert with the Pastor. This event differs with Dinner with the Pastor because the event is hosted in a home with church guests with the intent of building relationships and discovering if the guests have a personal relationship with Christ. No opportunity is given to join the church. The hope is the prospects will feel welcomed, build a relationship with church members, and eventually join the church. The outreach event usually takes place at the poolside and each attender has an opportunity to share a life story. Each church member listens for cues to see if the testimony was one of faith in Jesus Christ.

Provide Opportunities to Commit

An exposition of the Scripture reveals that God’s children are to commit to one another, and the churches researched indeed preach and teach this precept. However, it would seem that churches offering multiple ways to make this commitment have a higher church growth percentage. Recognizing the goal of church membership growth is the growth of the kingdom of God through repentance and salvation through faith of the individual, Fish reminds readers that

¹⁸ Cornette, “A Leadership Model Project.”

there are multiple ways of having an “invitation.”¹⁹ First Baptist of Venice offers multiple venues for guests to join the church family and the family of God. The most common way for someone to join a Baptist church is to walk down the aisle during the altar call and let the pastor know of the desire to join the church. This option is most popular in southern United States. First Baptist offers this option, but with many northern residents, this is not the most optimal route; however, that many new members do not join the church during altar call does not in any way mean it should be done away with because many do participate in this precious moment at the end of the worship service.

The most common way to join First Baptist Church of Venice is through the new member and church information class, First Step. As described above, each attender must share a personal testimony of faith in Christ in front of the entire group. The individuals choosing to join must also agree to be baptized by immersion if they had not already done so. For many, giving a personal Christian testimony is harder than walking down an aisle because it is much more intimate.

Another way First Baptist invites people to join the church is holding private meetings with a guest wishing to join, which may seem less intimidating. Whether such private invitations are widely accepted or not, some people will not, because of shyness, a life-altering event, or church background, publicly proclaim their decision in front of a group of people, by walking down an aisle or sharing their testimony. Therefore, First Baptist permits such individuals to join the church through a private meeting with one of the pastors.

¹⁹ Fish, *Coming to Jesus*, 40–46.

Inform the Family and the Guests of the Newest Members

The most important thing about joining First Baptist Church of Venice is that people are saved, baptized, and called to be discipled and to disciple others. In this context, informing the church family of new members is part of the worship service. The new members are not voted on in a business meeting, but in the worship service through a picture slide. Included on the picture slide is information about how the person is asking to join the church. There are four basic options: statement of faith, profession of faith and baptism, letter from another Southern Baptist church, and WatchCare. One important piece of information on the new member slide is which Bible Study group the new member has been assigned to attend or is already attending. All new members are enrolled in a Bible study group. This does not ensure attendance, but it does ensure the person will be contacted by a group of people from the church. This contact happens often, because the church wants all members to be invited to every ministry opportunity the assigned group is having, whether it is at the church or not. Much spiritual profit has resulted from the church's constantly waving the flag of small groups in front of those attending the worship services.

Assimilate into a Bible Study Group

Members and non-members should be allowed to attend a group Bible study. There are obvious benefits to inviting church guests to a group. This should be the regular process for any church membership prospect, because group life is essential to the growth of the church and the spiritual growth of God's children. The final fruit determining spiritual growth is whether a person is leading other people in spiritual growth. One of the purposes of placing committed believers in small groups is to model the discipleship method of Jesus, to send each new member into a small group, and to have that small group send out small group leaders. The idea is

multiplication ministry. As Dave Earley states, “Multiplying leaders was both the strategy and command of Jesus.”²⁰ Jesus gave His followers a two-step plan for reaching the world: each Christian is to make disciples and have the new disciples make new disciples. There has never been, nor will there ever be, a more effective system to accomplish the great commission. This model drives the ministry at First Baptist Church of Venice. Regarding smaller church environments, Thom Rainer writes, “Any kind of healthy organism reproduces. Reproduction can occur in any number of ways, but the most common among smaller churches this Sunday school classes or small groups.”²¹ Churches all over the country understand the effectiveness of having small group ministry. One church grew over one thousand people in four years with the focus on multiplying through small groups. An *Outreach* magazine contributor writes, “As they [Elevate Life Church] grow, one focus point is eGroups, a small group ministry offering Bible studies and other activities. ‘They’ve been a huge part in not just being able to draw people,’ Staier [the Senior Pastor] states the church grows as ‘people grow in faith and become people who draw other people, [members] serve and lead groups.’”²² It is essential to every new member of the family of God to spend time with and be mentored by other more mature Christians, and this is best done in the small group setting. The more an individual congregation leverages the importance of small groups participation, the greater the opportunity the congregation has in starting new groups and reaching more people for Christ.

²⁰ Earley, *Turning Members into Leaders*, 19.

²¹ Thom Rainer, “From My Perspective,” *Facts and Trends*, Spring, 2016, 6.

²² Gail Short, “Committed to ‘The One’: A Jacksonville Plant Grows to 1000+ in Less Than 4 Years,” *Outreach*, July/August 2015, 34.

Chapter Summary

The research found that the model church has substantially more new members than the other churches researched during the five-year period. All the churches had approximately the same age membership, held the same views of theological doctrines, and had the same number of guests visiting weekly. The only difference between the model church and the other churches is that the model church is the only church that continues to contact first-time guests until they decide to make the membership commitment. This research believes that the entire follow-up system described in this chapter is what made the difference in the model church's substantial membership growth.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The opportunities for further research are plentiful. Listed below are twelve excellent topics for further research. The most obvious place for further research is exploring how many new church members at the surveyed church are currently involved in leading newcomers to baptism and making new disciples who are committed to the church family. This is the criteria for measuring all Christian ministry.

Another opportunity for further research is determining how many of the new members stayed involved in a church over a specific span of time. Ultimately, it would be a sign of Christian growth if church members were active in starting new churches or leaving the church to go into full-time missions.

The average ages of the churches studied in this research is forty to sixty. Research could be conducted to see if the results would be the same if the sample involved younger adults in the range of eighteen to thirty years of age.

Facts regarding the time it takes a person to join the church after the first visit would also be a worthwhile topic for study. It may become a matter of frustration for leaders when people do not join a church right away, but knowing the average time it takes for visitors at churches of comparable size, location, denomination, and age group may eliminate some of the frustration.

It is obvious from the sampling and other research that Bible study groups are a major factor in the growth of healthy churches.¹ The question that needs to be answered as it relates to this study is how many new members joined groups after they attended the church versus how

¹ Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Phillip Nation. *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 223.

many people attended groups before attending a formal worship gathering. Either of these scenarios is acceptable, but if the statistics lean substantially in one direction or the other, the church should plan and budget accordingly. Also, a question needing an answer is how many new members attended a small group Bible study after joining the church. This is important as the church communicates to new members how vitally important group life is to the new member's remaining an active part of the church family.

Another topic for further study would be to look at the church's response to growth in one specific demographic. The research would examine whether a church budgeted more funds and staff to a growing portion of the church membership. For example, if the church had a twenty-percent addition of new members that were baby boomers, did the retired adult ministry budget increase accordingly, and if so, what were the results the following year? Another question might be this: did the church give the children's ministry more space when the children's ministry increased attendance by twenty percent in one year, and if so what were the results the following year? Other factors such as adequate parking, space for worship, internal factors like as staff cohesiveness, tenure, and personal agreement with the mission and vision of the church can all be reviewed to gain further insight into the effectiveness of moving church membership prospects to full membership in the local church.

Appendix A

Senior Pastor Survey Results

Please define the Bible.

Respondent 1: The Bible is "God-breathed," meaning it is inspired by Him and is His revelation to us. Through the Bible we "know" who God is and what He desires. Through Scripture we discover our purpose for life, to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

Respondent 2: The Bible is a collection of writings inspired by God, written by men. It is the revealed Word of God and is the authority for both faith and practice in the Christian faith.

Respondent 3: The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Respondent 4: God's Holy Word, containing everything necessary for faith, doctrine, life and salvation.

Respondent 5: We believe that the Bible is God's Word and is the primary authority for our faith and practice. We say that the Bible is vital to our faith and life, but what exactly is the Bible? Here are four ways to view it: A library; The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and twenty-seven in the New Testament. These books were written over a one-thousand-year period in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), and Greek. The books are of different lengths and different literary styles. In the Hebrew Bible we find legends, histories, liturgies for community worship, songs, proverbs, sermons, even a poetic drama (Job). In the New Testament are Gospels, a history, many letters, and an apocalypse (Revelation). Yet through it all the Bible is the story of the one God, who stands in a covenant relationship with the people of God. Sacred Scripture in early times and over many generations, the sixty-six books were thoughtfully used by faithful people. In the process their merits were weighed, and the community of believers finally gave them special authority. Tested by faith, proven by experience, these books have become sacred; they've become our rule for faith and practice. In Israel the Book of Deuteronomy was adopted as the Word of God about 621 B.C. The Torah, or Law (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), assumed authority around 400 B.C.; the Prophets about 200 B.C.; and the Writings about 100 B.C. After a struggle the Christians determined that the Hebrew Bible was Scripture for them as well. The New Testament as we know it was formed and adopted by church councils between A.D. 200 and A.D. 400. God's Word; We say that God speaks to us through the Bible, that it's God's Word. This authority derives from three sources: We hold that the writers of the Bible were inspired, that they were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of

their knowledge. We hold that God was at work in the process of canonization, during which only the most faithful and useful books were adopted as Scripture. We hold that the Holy Spirit works today in our thoughtful study of the Scripture, especially as we study them together, seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities. The Bible's authority is, therefore, nothing magical. For example, we do not open the text at random to discover God's will. The authority of Scripture derives from the movement of God's Spirit in times past and in our reading of it today. A guide to faith and life We United Methodists put the Bible to work. In congregational worship we read from the Bible. Through preaching, we interpret its message for our lives. It forms the background of most of our hymns and liturgy. It's the foundation of our church school curriculum. Many of us use it in our individual devotional lives, praying through its implications day by day. However, we admit that there's still vast "biblical illiteracy" in our denomination. We need to help one another open the Bible and use it. Perhaps the Bible is best put to use when we seriously answer these four questions about a given text: (1) What did this passage mean to its original hearers? (2) What part does it play in the Bible's total witness? (3) What does God seem to be saying to my life, my community, my world, through this passage? and (4) What changes should I consider making as a result of my study? From United Methodist Member's Handbook, Revised by George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006), pp. 80–81.

Respondent 6: The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Respondent 7: God's Infallible Word!

Respondent 8: The revelation of God to man in written form. It is His sufficient and final word to us.

Respondent 9: God's Word!

Respondent 10: God's inerrant revelation to mankind.

Please define the local church.

Respondent 1: The local church is an assembly of "called-out" followers of Christ who have bound themselves to a common covenant of faith in Christ, as evidenced through baptism by immersion and a commitment to carry out the mission of the church.

Respondent 2: The local church is where the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are administered. It is a fellowship of believers where people grow in their knowledge of Christ and their love for one another. It is an outpost of Christ's Kingdom where mission and outreach are conducted for the glory of God.

Respondent 3: A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

Respondent 4: The Body of Christ, the extension of the incarnation, made up of born-again believers who have accepted Christ as Savior and Lord, and have taken upon themselves the mandate of the Great Commission.

Respondent 5: The church is the body of Christ, an extension of Christ's life and ministry in the world today. We believe that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We believe that the church is "the communion of saints," a community made up of all past, present, and future disciples of Christ. We believe that the church is called to worship God and to support those who participate in its life as they grow in faith. Excerpt from *What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Theology* (Discipleship Resources, 2002), p. 14.

Respondent 6: Again, I like the Baptist Faith and Message 2000: A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

Respondent 7: Bride of Christ & hope of the world.

Respondent 8: A community of baptized believers in Jesus Christ in a local place who covenant together to gather in worship, and participate in ministry and mission.

Respondent 9: A committed body of disciples--believers at various stages of their journey of faith

Respondent 10: The local Body of Christ, where believers gather for encouragement, edification, and to worship God, so that we can be His witnesses to a lost world.

How does a person become reconciled to God?

Respondent 1: Christ through His finished work on the cross makes reconciliation with God the Father possible for "all" men. However, it is through faith "in Christ" that a person "appropriates" this reconciliation with God. Christ has made peace with God.

Respondent 2: Only through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Respondent 3: Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer. In its broadest sense salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. A. Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace. Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God. Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Saviour. B. Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God. C. Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person's life. Glorification is the culmination of salvation and is the final blessed and abiding state of the redeemed.

Respondent 4: By the confession of sins, repentance, and acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior, believing in him as God's own Son, the only way to heaven, and by believing that he has been raised from the dead.

Respondent 5: What does it mean to be saved and to be assured of salvation? It's to know that after feeling lost and alone, we've been found by God. It's to know that after feeling worthless, we've been redeemed. It's to experience a reunion with God, others, the natural world, and our own best selves. It's a healing of the alienation—the estrangement—we've experienced. In salvation we become whole. Salvation happens to us both now and for the future. It's "eternal life," that new quality of life in unity with God of which the Gospel of John speaks—a life that begins not at death, but in the present. But how does salvation happen? By grace through faith. Salvation cannot be earned. There's no behavior, no matter how holy or righteous, by which we can achieve salvation. Rather, it's the gift of a gracious God. By grace we mean God's extraordinary love for us. In most of life we're accustomed to earning approval from others. This is true at school, at work, in society, even at home—to a degree. We may feel that we have to act "just so" to be liked or loved. But God's love, or grace, is given without any regard for our goodness. It's unmerited, unconditional, and unending love. As we come to accept this love, to entrust ourselves to it, and to ground our lives in it, we discover the wholeness that God has promised. This trust, as we've seen, is called faith. God takes the initiative in grace; but only as

we respond through faith is the change wrought in us. This is the great theme of the Protestant Reformers, as well as John Wesley and the Methodists who followed: We're saved by grace alone through faith alone. We're made whole and reconciled by the love of God as we receive it and trust in it. Conversion This process of salvation involves a change in us that we call conversion. Conversion is a turning around, leaving one orientation for another. It may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative. But in any case it's a new beginning. Following Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "You must be born anew" (John 3:7 RSV), we speak of this conversion as rebirth, new life in Christ, or regeneration. Following Paul and Luther, John Wesley called this process justification. Justification is what happens when Christians abandon all those vain attempts to justify themselves before God, to be seen as "just" in God's eyes through religious and moral practices. It's a time when God's "justifying grace" is experienced and accepted, a time of pardon and forgiveness, of new peace and joy and love. Indeed, we're justified by God's grace through faith. Justification is also a time of repentance -- turning away from behaviors rooted in sin and toward actions that express God's love. In this conversion we can expect to receive assurance of our present salvation through the Holy Spirit "bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16). Growing in grace Conversion is but the beginning of the new life of wholeness. Through what Wesley called God's "sanctifying grace," we can continue to grow. In fact, Wesley affirmed, we're to press on, with God's help, in the path of sanctification, the gift of Christian perfection. The goal of the sanctified life is to be perfected in love, to experience the pure love of God and others, a holiness of heart and life, a total death to sin. We're not there yet; but by God's grace, as we United Methodists say, "we're going on to perfection!" From United Methodist Member's Handbook, Revised by George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006), pp. 78–79.

Respondent 6: Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer. In its broadest sense salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. A. Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace. Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God. Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Saviour. B. Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God. C. Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person's life. D. Glorification is the culmination of salvation and is the final blessed and abiding state of the redeemed. Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility. All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may

fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. med.

Respondent 7: Believe that Jesus is who he says he is, that he died and rose from the dead, that he is the one son of God, and that he will return again. That meant that you are a sinner in need of a savior. Repent of your sins and asked for forgiveness. Except Jesus as your perfect substitute. Believe that you are a new creation in Christ.

Respondent 8: Through repentance and faith in the reconciling ministry of Jesus on the cross and validated in His resurrection.

Respondent 9: Faith in Jesus Christ Romans 10:9–10.

Respondent 10: Salvation experience through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Describe your church's first-time guest follow-up process.

Respondent 1: The deacon of the week does the initial follow-up with first-time guests. Afterwards, staff and other members of the body perform personal follow-up.

Respondent 2: 1) Pastor calls. 2) a letter is sent inviting them to a pastor's social. 3) Cookies are delivered.

Respondent 3: A person is added to our prospect list when they give their information at any of our sponsored church events. The person is added to the e-mail list and is then contacted weekly by e-mail. The person is also added to a pastor prospect list and should be contacted at least monthly. the person is contacted by a small group leader and asked to join the study. The person is removed from the list when they join the church or request to not be contacted any longer.

Respondent 4: Guests are contacted by letter and e-mail if available and their information is turned over to our membership team for further follow-up.

Respondent 5: Here at _____, everyone is asked to complete a "Response Card" and place it in the offering plate when it is passed during worship. Part of that response is includes an invitation to let us know that you are a first-time guest. On Monday morning a group of persons sorts through everything put in the offering plates and gives those marked "first-time guest" to a designated administrative staff person. Information from the cards is entered into our church's database and sent electronically to a follow-up team, the cards are passed on to me (the pastor) I write a note to each person/family and it gets mailed out, on Tuesday. Persons who are responsible for following up with a friendly phone call and or e-mail and an invitation to join them at an upcoming event or worship and Sunday school class the following week.

Respondent 6: Once a person visits our church they are sent a letter from the senior pastor. The week of their visit they are visited by a team from the church. This visit is a quick visit to say

thank you for visiting and they are given a loaf of homemade bread. A pastor visit is also made if the couple indicates on the guest card they would like a visit

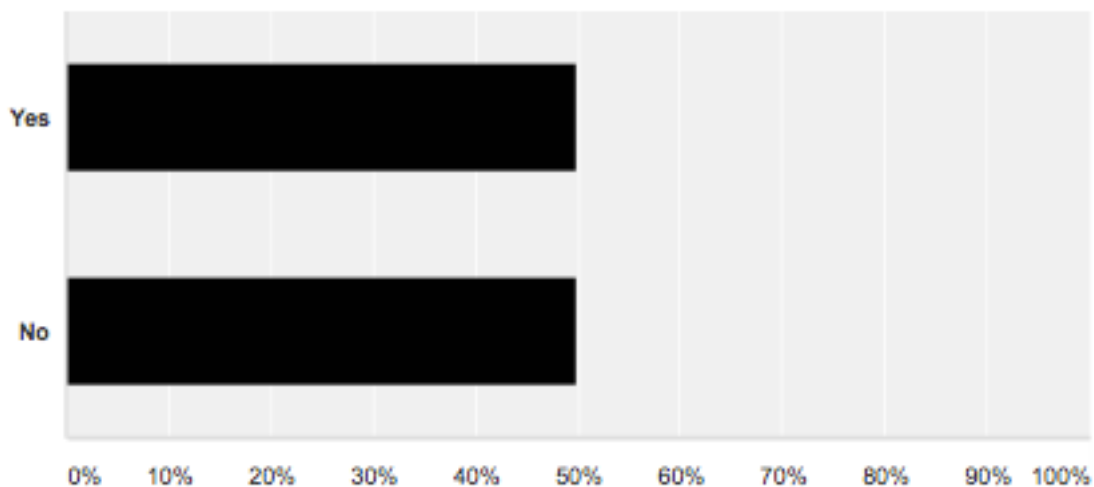
Respondent 7: Write hand-written letter. Send an e-mail. Offer discipleship opportunities. Offer areas of service needs. Invite to membership.

Respondent 8: Personal contact from a pastor, letter from the pastor, outreach by deacons and other staff, in-home visit, invitation to Next Steps luncheon. All of this is tracked by the office staff.

Respondent 9: Letter from Sr Pastor Phone call from Associate If local we are utilizing a lay visit [work in progress].

Respondent 10: Letter from the Sr. Pastor, Invitation to a quarterly New Guest Luncheon.

Is one person on your church staff or in your church membership assigned to see that all guests are contacted?



How long does it take for a first-time guest to be contacted by a member of your church family?

Respondent 1: The plan is to contact guests within a day or two of their visiting with us.

Respondent 2: Within the first week of their visit.

Respondent 3: Within 48 hours.

Respondent 4: within one day

Respondent 5: Contact is made on Monday if we have access to a phone number or an e-mail address. If those are not available, a note goes out in the mail on Tuesday.

Respondent 6: Less than a week

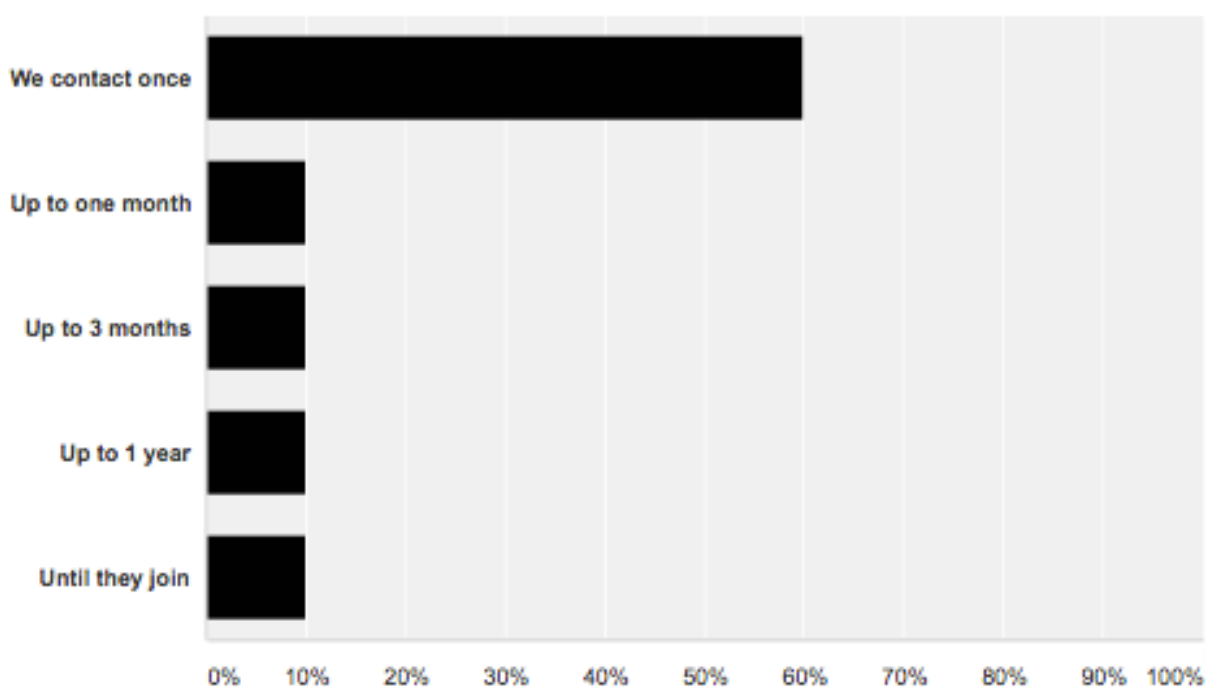
Respondent 7: Same week.

Respondent 8: A few hours.

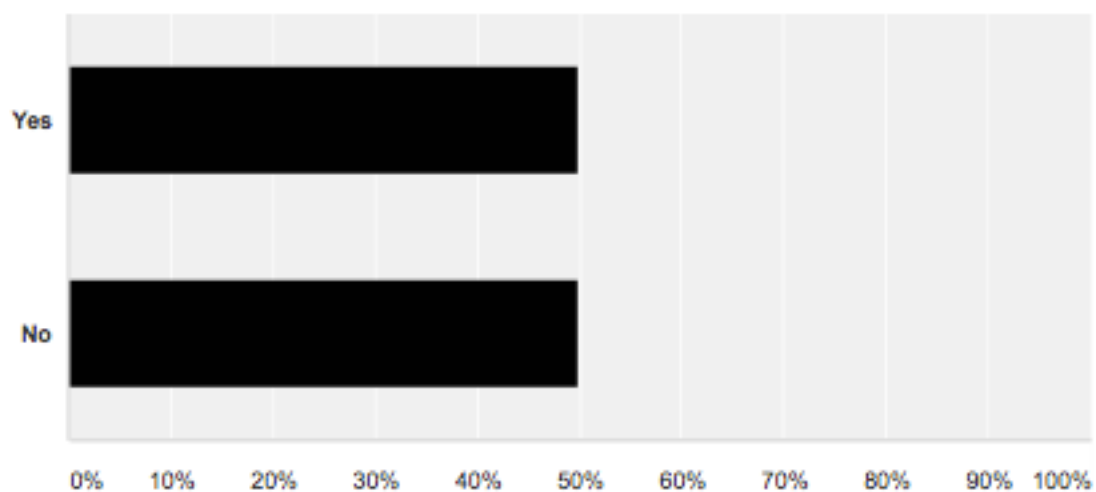
Respondent 9: 48–72 hours.

Respondent 10: Weeks.

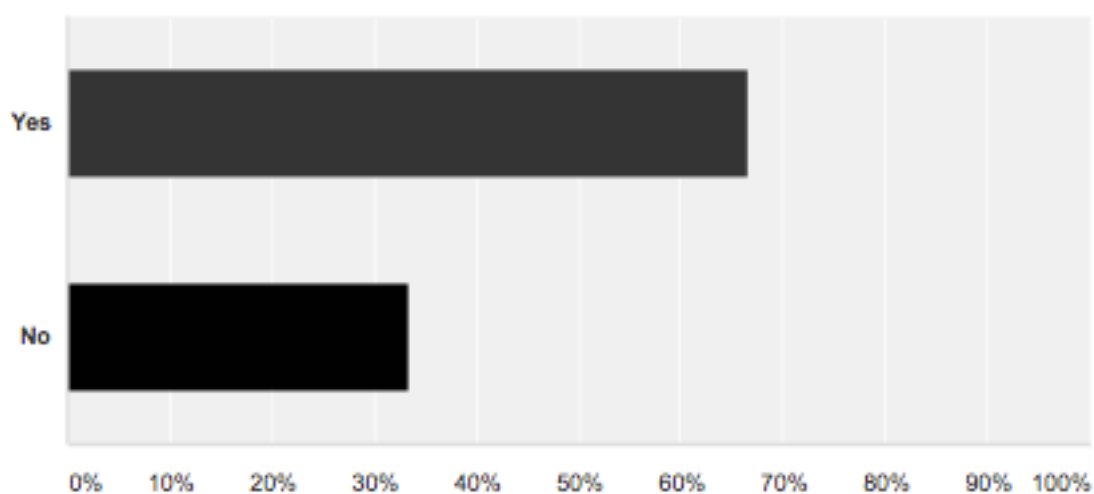
How often do you contact visitors after their first visit?



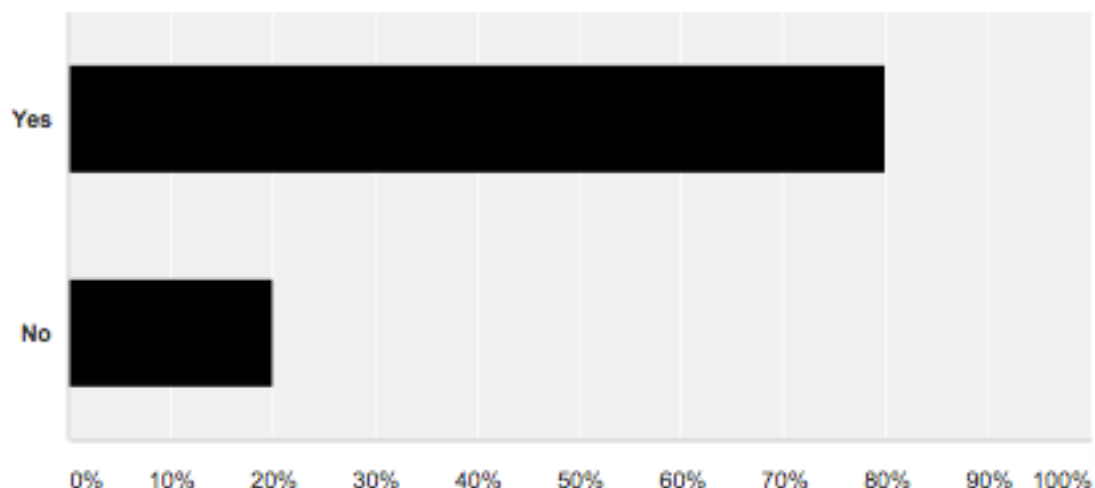
Does your church keep a master list of church prospects?



If yes, is this list reviewed at a specific time weekly or monthly?



Does your church require a new member class before an individual can become a member of your church?



If your church has a required new member class, how do you advertise when the class will be held? Please list every means by which a person may hear about the class.

Respondent 1: We offer a "Discovery" class for new members and people interested in joining the church. This is offered to people joining the church and advertised in various church publications.

Respondent 2: Bulletin, newsletter, announcement slide during worship service, letter to visitors.

Respondent 3: Personal phone call, e-blast to the church, personal e-mail, church bulletin, lobby monitor, announcement from the platform.

Respondent 4: Announcements, bulletin and personal contact.

Respondent 5: Bulletin, newsletter, announcements, e-mail blasts and personal invitation.

Respondent 6: 1 from the platform, 2 website, 3 bulletin, 4 e-mail, 5 newsletter, 6 Sunday school.

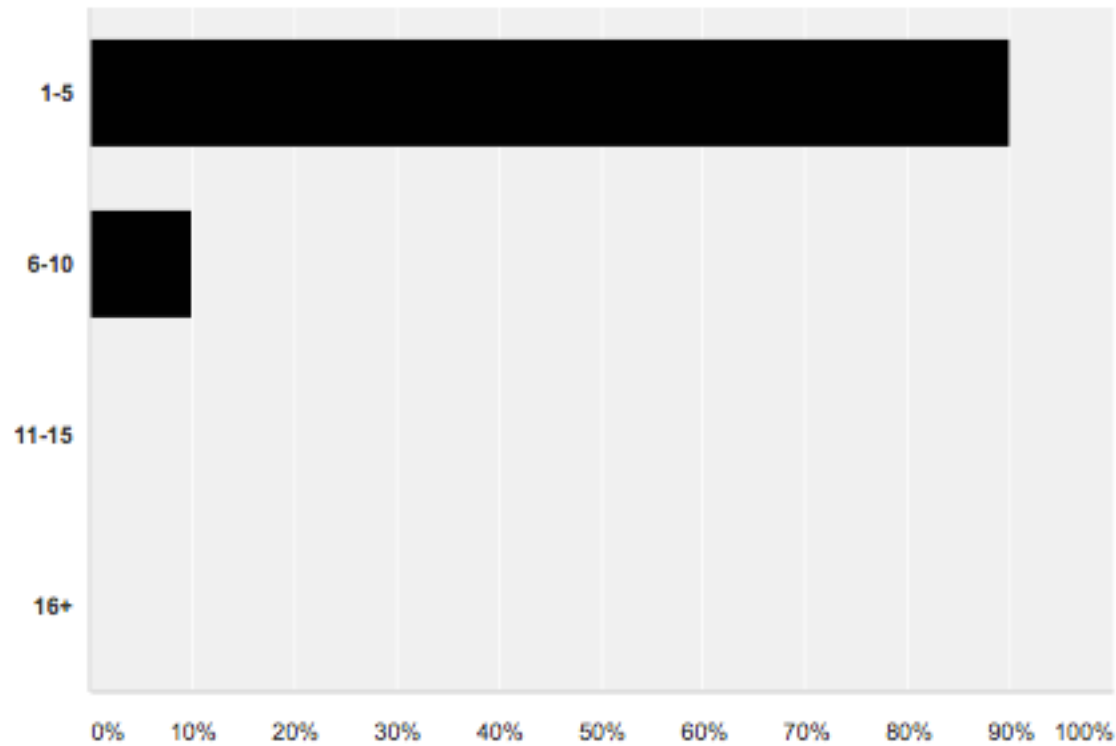
Respondent 7: Bulletin, and personal invitation sent via mail.

Respondent 8: Bulletin and e-mail invite.

Respondent 9: Sunday Bulletin and Verbal Announcements.

Respondent 10: No Response.

On average, how many first-time guests have you recorded each Sunday over the last five years?



How many baptisms has the church recorded between January 2010 and December 2014?

Respondent 1: 45

Respondent 2: 40

Respondent 3: 120

Respondent 4: 50

Respondent 5: 25

Respondent 6: 23

Respondent 7: 120

Respondent 8: 106

Respondent 9: 30

Respondent 10: 20

What was your total church membership in 2010?

Respondent 1: 696
Respondent 2: 884
Respondent 3: 600
Respondent 4: 600
Respondent 5: 814
Respondent 6: 549
Respondent 7: 986
Respondent 8: 787
Respondent 9: 1000
Respondent 10: 310

What was your total church membership in 2014?

Respondent 1: 730
Respondent 2: 844
Respondent 3: 984
Respondent 4: 600
Respondent 5: 723
Respondent 6: 585
Respondent 7: 1012
Respondent 8: 810
Respondent 9: 650
Respondent 10: 250

How are new members introduced to the church family?

Respondent 1: Presented at the conclusion of a worship service.

Respondent 2: Introduced to congregation when they join. Picture on bulletin board.

Respondent 3: At the end of the service via slide with a picture indicating how they are joining the church and which small group they are enrolled.

Respondent 4: they are introduced when they join, at our annual new members banquet, and are personally introduced to leaders appropriate to the new member's interests.

Respondent 5: At worship on New Member Sundays.

Respondent 6: They are presented for a church vote. Upon approval every member of the church is invited to come forward and introduce themselves.

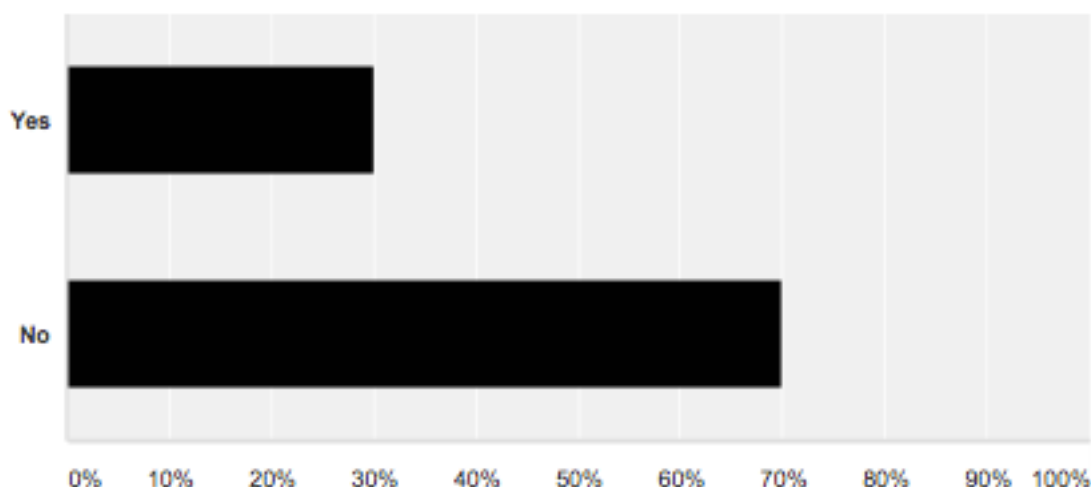
Respondent 7: 1 membership class (1 day/5hrs); 2 pastoral recommendation; 3 board approval; 4 celebration service, which we publicly introduce them as members.

Respondent 8: Publicly at the end of a church service.

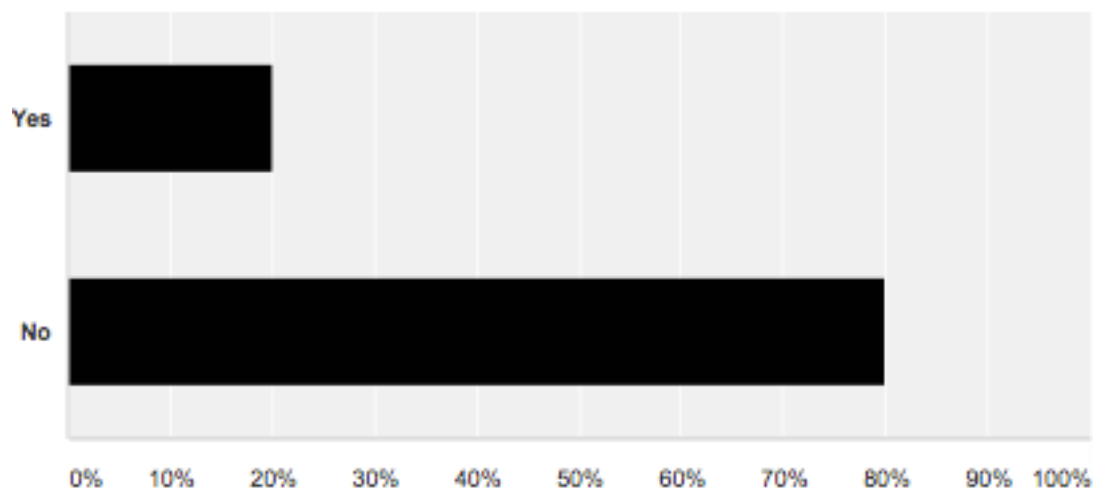
Respondent 9: LBa 1st then presented at both services.

Respondent 10: Installation ceremony.

Are new church members automatically enrolled into a small group Bible study?



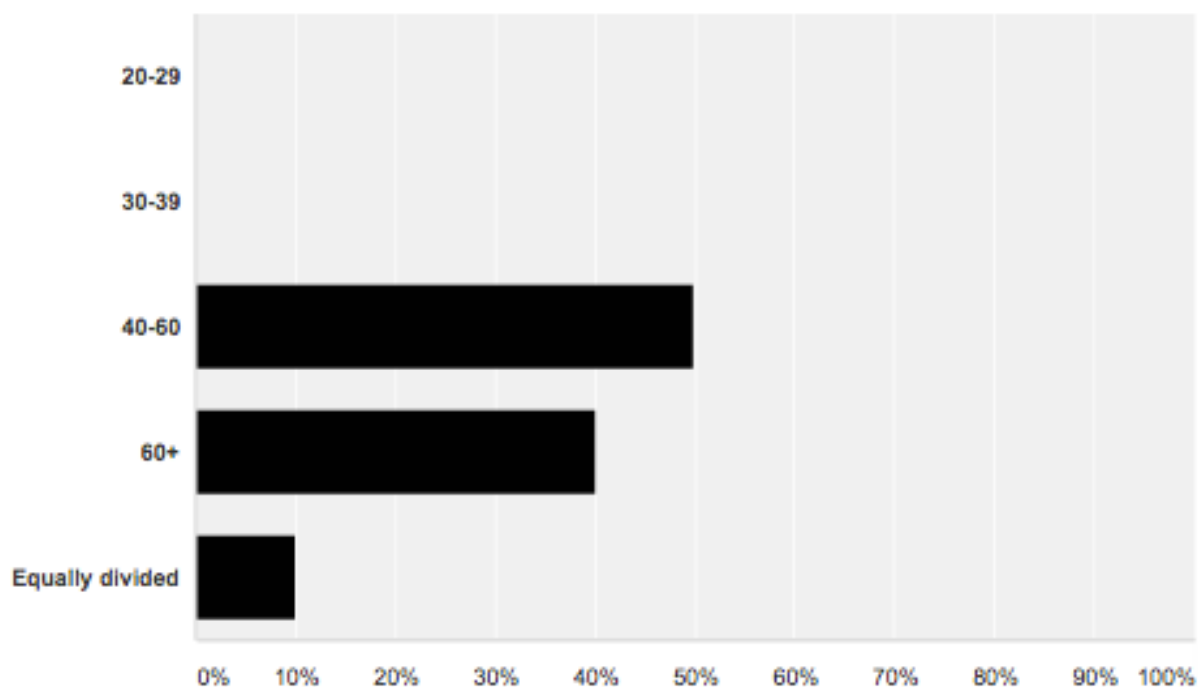
Does a person have to be a member of your church to serve in your church?



Which one of these statements do you most agree with?

Answer Choices	Responses
▼ Only church members should lead a Bible study and they don't need church authority to do so.	10.00% 1
▼ To lead a Bible study, a person should be a member of a church and should get permission from a local church to do so.	50.00% 5
▼ Non-church members who are church attenders in good standing can lead Bible studies.	40.00% 4
▼ Any Christian, whether he/she does or does not attend a local church, can lead a Bible study.	0.00% 0
Total	10

Which of these statements best describes the age of your church membership?



What church database software are you currently using?

Respondent 1: Church Management Software

Respondent 2: Shelby

Respondent 3: Shelby

Respondent 4: Shepherd's Staff

Respondent 5: Shelby

Respondent 6: Power Church Plus

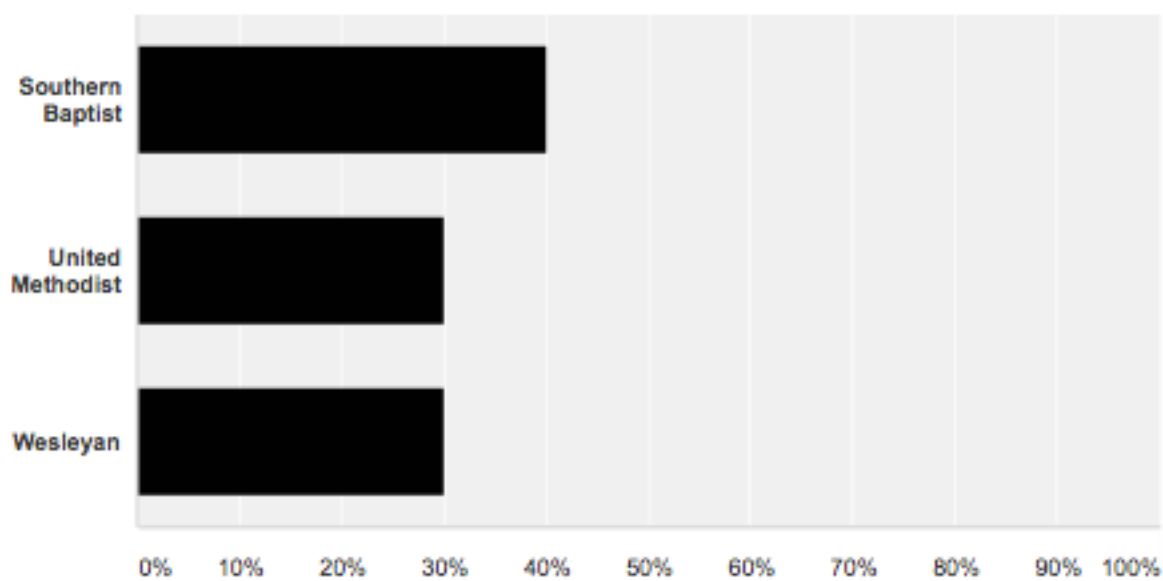
Respondent 7: Fellowship One

Respondent 8: CDM+

Respondent 9: Shelby

Respondent 10: Power Church

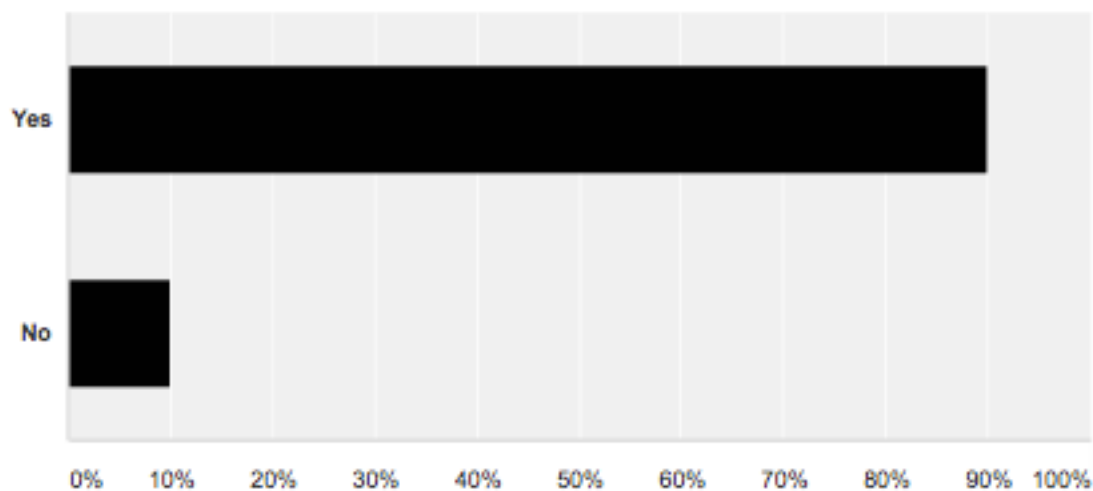
My church denomination is:



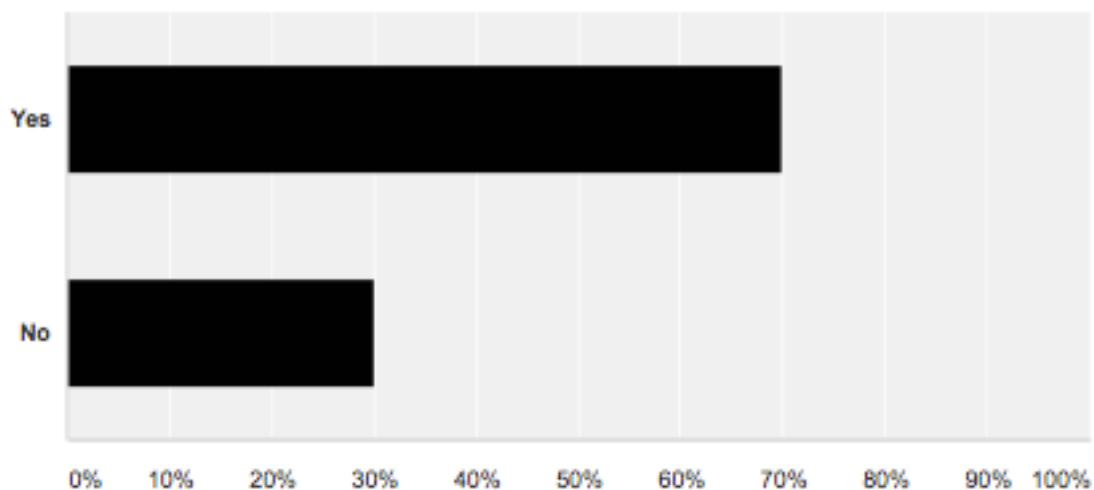
Appendix B

Staff Member Interviews

Does your senior pastor model a desire to move people from guests to membership?



Is a staff member encouraged privately or publicly for moving people to membership?



When was the last sermon or Bible study taught on the value of church membership?

Respondent 1: More than one year ago

Respondent 2: November 2015

Respondent 3: January?

Respondent 4: 6–8 months ago, we had a vision retreat and the people in attendance were given the book "I am the church." Once we read it, we were asked to pass it to another congregation member and keep it going. Pastor then preached on it a few times following that and will reference it.

Respondent 5: Monthly.

Respondent 6: Unknown when a sermon/bible study was dedicated to the subject, but we do have a new member induction service that incorporates the membership into the vows.

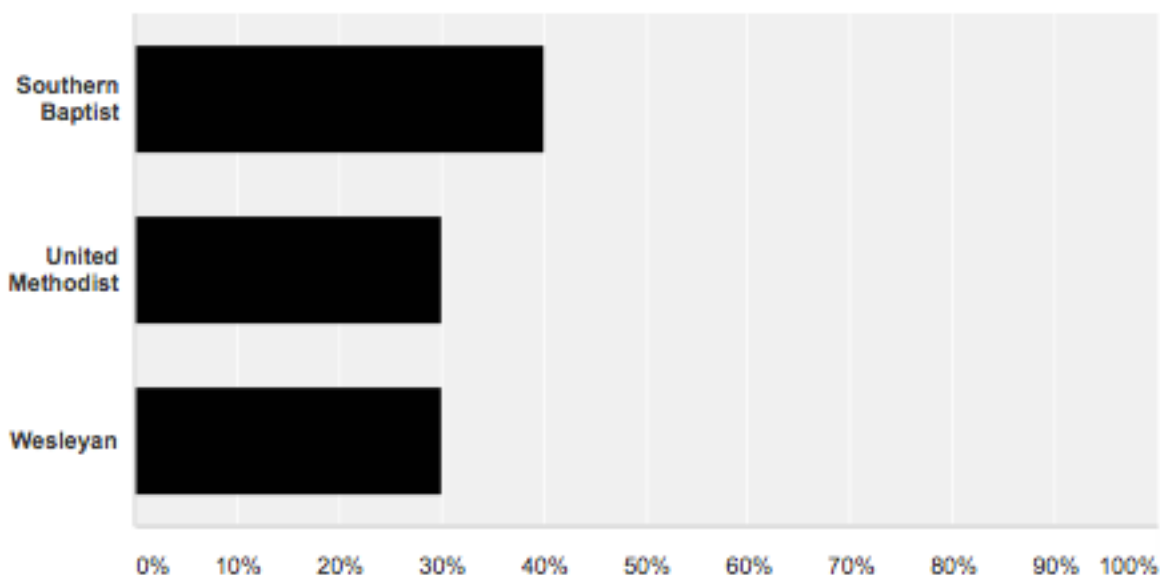
Respondent 7: Within the last four months. It is something that we list annually.

Respondent 8: 1 Kings 5 - Preparation of the Building of the Temple - Building the Church inside and out - building the people of God - building a model for the community, for the kingdom of God.

Respondent 9: SoulShift the measure of a life transformed (by two Wesleyan ministers). Currently doing this series on Sunday and in Wednesday night studies.

Respondent 10: 9-27-15 Next set of Membership Matters classes begins 1/10/16.

My church denomination is:



Appendix C

PowerPoint Slides

Slide 1: In actuality, this is not just a thesis on church growth. The writer is not trying to increase the number of members in any church, but rather the writer is desirous of highlighting the need Christians have for committing to other Christians.

Slide 2: The purpose of this project is to determine a successful process to follow up on first-time church guests, moving them from visiting the church to committing to the church in membership. The focus on membership is also a focus on salvation, as salvation in Christ is the first step in committing to the family of God that functions in a community known as the local church.

Slide 3: The churches researched are from three different denominations. The denominations are Southern Baptist, United Methodist, and Wesleyan.

Slide 4: This research is also limited in the scope of determining if a new member is practicing the spiritual disciplines and remains an active participant in church ministries.

Slide 5: “So for these five reasons and more we believe that membership is a New Testament expectation for all believers. Each of us should be a member of a local body of believers. We should take responsibility to discipline those of the body who do not repent from public sin that brings reproach on the name of Christ. We should declare ourselves part of the body so that if we are wayward, we ourselves would be liable to such exclusion. We should take our position under the leadership and authority of a particular group of elders. We should declare ourselves part of a group who expect to be watched over and cared for by a particular group of elders. And we should find our place in the organic whole as a body part—a member—of a local body of Christ. That is God’s plan for us and for this church. That’s what we mean by membership. All of those aspects of membership are rooted in the truth that the local church is an expression of the universal church. Part of what it means to belong to the body of Christ is to belong to a body.”
John Piper

Slide 6: Without an active church membership, the church cannot function as it was intended to. Each church is filled with people with spiritual gifts and spiritual mandates from the Holy Spirit. When church members fail to use the spiritual gifts and follow the mandates, the churches fail the mission of Christ. Patterson stresses that the church body elects the church pastor and the church pastor is the head of the church second only to Christ. How can the local church elect the leader of the church if they are not committed to one another? This is the strong case made for each member of the Body to commit to one another.

Slide 7: There is a plethora of new member assimilation books and research papers for the church. These typically are focused on how to get someone who has joined a church to begin to serve in the church, attend worship regularly, and join a Bible study group.

Slide 8: Ricky Jones, the Lead Pastor of River Oaks Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, adds to this

subject. His article, “Is Church Membership Really Required,” is a foundational resource as he uses the Scripture to implore Christians to become part of a local church. Jones insists, “I want you to understand that being a part of the universal Church without submitting to a local church is not possible, biblical, or healthy . . . to imply you can be part of the greater community without first being part of the smaller is not logical. . . . Every letter in the New Testament assumes Christians are members of local churches. The letters themselves are addressed to local churches. They teach us how to get along with other members.”

Slide 9: The model church, First Baptist Church of Venice, Florida, added 384 new members in the five-year period from 2010 to 2014.

Slide 10: Nearly forty percent of the 384 new members have come to church membership through baptism.

Slide 11: It is important for those responsible in assisting people to commit to the church to know where the guests are in that process.

Slide 12: It is recognized that when a congregation’s membership roll increases, often the people on the roll can be unaccounted for. This is not a healthy characteristic and is unquestionably unbiblical. When a church membership is so large that people can live in anonymity, something must change.

Slide 13: The more followers accepting the responsibility to care for the members of the church and for bringing in more souls into the kingdom, the more successful the ministry will be. It is also a sign of a healthy, biblical community.

Slide 14: Each group of Christians connected through a commitment known as church membership has a recognized system in place to move people from visiting the group to committing to the mission of the church.

Slide 15: Follow-up on the first-time guest is the essential factor in making another person feel comfortable at any church gathering. Without follow-up the guest is left not knowing if visiting was appreciated or even noticed.

Slide 16: Jesus loves His church as a man would love his bride. The comparison is striking. No man would say he loved his wife and then ignore her. No man would say he loved his wife and then fail to come home to her. No man would say he loved his wife and then speak negatively about her in the company of others. The same is true for the church.

Slide 17: Many Baptist churches only provide one opportunity for a person to join the church. This is by walking forward at the end of the service during the altar call. However, this research suggests that churches offering more than one method for a person to join the fellowship would have a higher percentage of new members than churches that offer only one or two opportunities.

Slide 18: There are two reasons for informing the church family of new members. One is a biblical reason; the other is the benefit to be gained from it. Jesus commands that new believers

be baptized. There is no other way to stay faithful to the Lord and His Word than to baptize new believers into the family of God and into the local gathering of Christians. The second reason is that the local church receives encouragement when the evidence of great spiritual labor is expressed in the waters of baptism.

Slide 19: Introducing a new Christian or new church member into a small group of other Christians is the only way to ensure the person is accountable. It also must be said that a smaller group of Christians must know how to appropriately lead the small group. Small groups are not therapy sessions, nor are they groups where the members get to monopolize the conversations and pontificate about subjects not related to the spiritual growth of the others. Disciple-makers are mentors and can assist Christians in a multitude of areas, but the primary reason for small groups are to press believers to go further spiritually.

Slide 20: Each church in the survey gives similar definitions for the Bible.

Slide 21: The pastors in the survey had much in common in their definition of the New Testament “church.” In their responses, the phrases used for what the church is and what the church should be doing were these: “the church should be preaching the word of God,” “the church is the Body of Christ,” “the church should be fulfilling the Great Commission,” “the church is a gathering of baptized believers,” “the church is responsible for conducting the sacraments,” “the church is believers in a covenantal agreement,” “the church is the Bride of Christ,” “the church is a group of growing Christ-followers and a group of witnesses gathered to show the love of Christ.” All of these are biblical definitions of how the church is to be recognized and how it should function in the world.

Slide 22: As non-Christians see how Christians relate to one another and the submissive attitude the believers have toward the Savior, their internal conscience can be stirred positively toward Christ. As non-Christians observe the life of a Christian family in small groups throughout the week, God can assist the non-Christians in seeing the need for repentance, pointing their heart toward faith in Christ.

Slide 23: The most critical definition pastors were asked to answer is how a person is reconciled to God. Many denominations and religions focus on the works of mankind to reconcile humans to God. Sadly, this is also true in many Christian churches and is preached knowingly and unknowingly from pulpits throughout the world. Gladly, this is not the message taught in the Bible or by the pastors taking part in this research.

Slide 24: This research found that neither the pastors’ beliefs about core doctrines nor their perceptions of the denomination they served determined the effectiveness of moving people to the church commitment level.

Slide 25: Success in a worldly sense is having a large church membership so that the leadership or the congregation can be brag about it. There are also many pastors who feel that it is because they preach the Word faithfully that their churches have low attendance record. Both these two extremes should be avoided.

Slide 26: Every Sunday is an opportunity to make a new disciple or to grow the church ministry by connecting with a Christian visiting the church worship service.

Slide 27: God's intention for the church from day one was for her to grow and flourish into a large multi-faceted structure, where personal change happens so that the people of God can get the story of Christ to the masses. The structure and systems, however, must encourage Christians to become more like Christ in their daily lives and to engage in ministry, rather than simply watching others do ministry.

Slide 28: The conclusion of the research indicates that the model church has substantially more new members than the other churches that were researched. Even though all of the churches had approximately the same age members, held the same views of theological doctrines, had the same number of guests, the model church was the only church that continued to contact first-time guests until they decided to make the membership commitment. This researcher believes that the entire system described in this thesis is what has made the difference in the model church's substantial church growth. Removing one or more of these steps can plateau the church's numerical growth.

Slide 29: The most obvious place for further research is determining how many new church members are currently involved in making new disciples and seeing the new disciples baptized into the local church family. This is the criteria for measuring all Christian ministry.

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December 8, 2015

Christopher Shane Cornette
IRB Approval 2352.120815: Five Practical Steps for Increasing Church Membership: A Case
Study of First Baptist Church of Venice, Florida

Dear Christopher,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

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