

Diagnose Your Church's Health Is the Church Keeping New Believers Who Join?

By Chuck Lawless

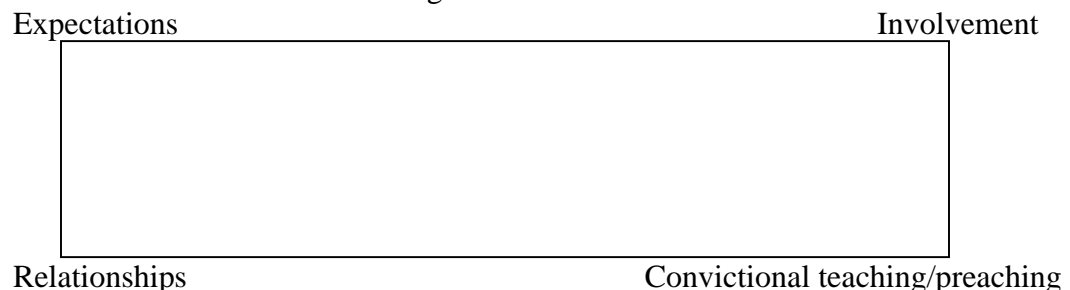
This article is the fifth in a series dealing with questions to ask when consulting with a church. Previous questions were:

- “Is the church’s teaching based on the Bible?”
- “Is the church a praying church?”
- “Is the church driven by a Great Commission focus?”
- “Is the church reaching non-believers?”

This month, the question for the consultant to ask is, “Is the church keeping new believers who join?” Given the fact that many churches have membership numbers that far exceed their actual attendance numbers, this question is an important one. The healthy church understands *and addresses* the many reasons that new believers—excited and zealous on their conversion—seemingly disappear not long after they join the church.

Listed below are steps to determine if the church is keeping the new believers they reach. As you read these suggestions, keep in mind that we are focusing on *conversion growth*—that is, on reaching and keeping new believers.

1. *Compare the church’s addition numbers with corresponding attendance numbers.* If, for example, a church reports twenty-five new believers in the last two years with a corresponding attendance increase of only ten, further review is warranted. The causes for the discrepancy may be many (e.g., job transfers for current members, deaths in the church, teams sent to church planting, conflict in the church), but one cause is often poor assimilation of new believers. Most churches would have grown significantly if they had kept at least 50 percent of their new members over the last 5-10 years.
2. *Review attendance and participation records of specific new believers.* In the above scenario, review the records for the twenty-five new believers. Are the new believers actively attending a small group? Are they participating in some type of ministry? Are they accountable to someone for their spiritual growth? If all new members are attending and participating, the cause for the membership/ attendance discrepancy may not be related to poor assimilation—at least not of these new believers. Seldom have we found that to be the case, however.
3. *Evaluate the church’s current strategy for keeping new believers.* Our studies of growing churches have shown four components of effective assimilation, best illustrated in an “assimilation rectangle”:



- Stated *expectations* help the new believer understand *up front* what God and the church expect; the growing believer is then held accountable to these expectations through participation in a small group.
- Ministry *involvement*—even in an “entry” position—gives the new believer purpose in the church. Involvement begins with a strategy to help believers understand their giftedness and callings.
- Healthy *relationships* help form the “glue” that draws new believers back to church; disciplined members then turn around and reach out to others.
- Convictional *teaching* and preaching meet the needs of new believers who long for Christian growth; these same believers then mature and grow under that preaching.

In many cases, though, churches have no intentional strategy in place.

Expectations are few, involvement is by accident, relationships are shallow, and the preaching is weak. Where there is no intentional strategy based on these components, it is not surprising that new believers do not remain long at such a church!

4. *Determine the church’s primary approach to evangelism.* Sometimes new members fall away because the presentation of the gospel that they hear is incomplete or misfocused. The gospel call that lacks repentance is insufficient, and the result is often new members who fall again into previous sin patterns. A gospel message that speaks only of blessings without sacrifice and commitment commonly leads to new believers who depart when those blessings are not immediately realized. A poor presentation of the gospel often reaps what it sows.
5. *Review the church’s covenant.* If indeed the church has a covenant that is relevant and utilized, does it require members to participate in the church? How and when do new members learn about the covenant? If no covenant exists, how do new believers learn what the church expects from them? And why is it surprising when new members do not live up to expectations about which they have heard nothing?
6. *Listen to new believers who no longer attend the church.* Interviewing church members is one of the most helpful and productive strategies of church consulting. With the church’s help, locate non-attending new believers and ask them why they no longer attend. Again, the causes may be several (e.g., laziness, church conflict, recurrent sin, “never really fit in,” etc.), but the church must recognize that *something* is amiss when new believers no longer participate in the church. Interviewing them may be the first step toward drawing them back to the congregation.
7. *Interview new believers who have remained in the church.* Just as something happens to leads to non-participation, something usually happens to keep new believers in the fold. The new believer may not be prepared to articulate that “something,” but a good consultant can interpret answers as needed. “It’s just friendly church” may mean, “They connected with me relationally.” “I feel important here,” may mean, “The church has given me some purpose.” “I get answers here” may well reflect the church’s commitment to teaching truth.

Ideally, the church’s new believers will all fit into this camp—remaining in the church and serving God through its ministries.