

Newcomer Ministry

MARKETING RESEARCH BULLETIN

Research reviews for church leaders.





Welcome to the *Marketing Research Bulletin*, a periodic report created for all Unity leaders, by the Association of Unity Churches Communications Department. This Bulletin provides valuable information on recent trends affecting church growth.

Information overload is a part of modern life, and data on trends affecting churches is no exception. We created these bulletins to give a quick reading for busy church leaders. We read multiple resources, including books and articles written by church growth experts, business writers and trend watchers in many disciplines. For those interested in greater depth, we

have included listings for further reading. In addition, to make it as practical as possible, we give ideas of implications for churches.

It is with love and awe for ministers, and those leaders who work alongside them, that we dedicate this work. And with blessings!

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Welcoming and assimilating newcomers into the church really involves a whole process, not just a one-shot program. It begins with the first visit to a church and continues until that elusive transition point when a person begins to feel like a part of the family. The goal at any point is to bring the newcomer ever closer to feeling that sense of family. This bulletin summarizes information about this process, taken from many sources. We begin by looking at the idea of hospitality and its spiritual underpinnings, then how welcoming takes place on the first visit and the follow-up, and finally at assimilating new people into the congregation.

A simple question

One question to ask in connection with a newcomer ministry is, "Do we want our church to grow?" This may seem simplistic. It is profound in that we can say we want to grow, but if we aren't willing to accept new people with all that it means, we won't grow. Herb Miller says that helping the church to be open to newcomers is a twofold task — helping the congregation to multiply, and helping them to be happy they did.

Harold Percy's Good News

People lists three other important questions that apply here. 1) What would we like to see happen in the lives of people who join in the life of our congregation? 2) From the point of view of those we would like to reach, what would make this church a worthwhile community to join? 3) What

price are we as a congregation prepared to pay in order to reach and assimilate newcomers?

The following information assumes that the congregation has considered these questions and is ready to grow, with a positive and relevant worship service in place. Yet we also note that church growth can never be the top priority. The emphasis is on our God-given ministry, and the impact we wish to have on people and their lives. If we are to grow in these two areas, we expect that numerical growth will follow. We must be willing for the effect to occur if we are to pursue the cause.

Focus

As you build the newcomer ministry in your church, keep in mind that most experts agree that "visitor" is a poor term to use, and instead recommend guests, newcomers, or first-timers. The word "guest" especially reminds us of the importance of our role in providing a welcoming experience, giving special honor to the newcomer.

Hospitality

One of the strengths of Unity is the environment of acceptance and forgiveness created by its teachings. Beyond that is an openness to different beliefs. This can provide a wonderful foundation for the idea of hospitality and welcome as a spiritual practice.

At the same time, in a society where fear and distrust have become more prevalent, people are

most in need of this acceptance. Anyone who has visited churches has the experience of being the stranger, perhaps of having no one speak to us or of being asked to move to another seat that was not "reserved" for a longtime member. These experiences occur regularly in churches (according to some ministers, even in Unity!) Having new people in our congregations creates change, resulting in mixed feelings about embracing the stranger. How can we demonstrate hospitality, as individuals and as congregations, ever more fully in response to the needs of our world?

Spiritual practice

Bernhard and Clapp describe the very roots of hospitality as being "woven into the foundation of Judaism and Christianity." In Hebrews (13:2), the importance of hospitality is stated, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." In fact, practicing hospitality means recognizing and honoring the presence of Christ in everyone. In the ancient Mediterranean world, people considered hospitality a sacred duty. Quoting from Bernhard and Clapp, the following were all included as part of hospitality:

- bowing—giving honor to the guest
- feet-washing—an act of kindness
- preparing and serving food—generosity
- all guests seen as potential friends—this was the assumption to start, and names and background information were considered unnecessary
- protection—if the guest were being pursued by an enemy, all

he had to do was to touch the peg of the host's tent to be safe

- nothing was expected in return

Unity Before Worship

In our Correspondence with eleven Unity churches, several tell us that they take steps before worship to welcome newcomers. Assigned stations for greeters, name tags for all congregants, and guests, and a welcome table are employed as ways to welcome. As part of preparation for the service, the worship team (including ushers and greeters) at Unity Church of Overland Park meets for prayer just before the service. They set their intention to let go of all that is distracting them, and to focus on making the service a loving experience for everyone.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the stranger's worthiness is not a focus, rather the faithfulness of the host is of greater importance (Matt. 26:6-13, Luke 14:12-24, Luke 19:1-10, John 13:1-20, Matt. 25:31-46). As is taught in Unity, our relationships with others are transformed by seeing the Christ in others. Bernhard and Clapp state it thus: "Welcoming the stranger opens the door to ... relationships and ... communion with one another and with God." If our understanding begins with the spiritual aspects of hospitality, we can keep it in perspective. As a path to spiritual growth, hospitality is also integral to the idea of Christian community. Bernhard and Clapp describe hospitality in one church as including some key components:

- training—classes offered in the intentional, spiritual

- practice of hospitality
- assigned duties—to make sure that important areas are not neglected
- people were prepared to invite guests to their homes for lunch (This was in a rural community; perhaps inviting guests to a restaurant would be as effective in a larger city. We know of a church where a group of people regularly went to lunch together after church, and they invited newcomers to join them.)
- listening—the leaders took steps to encourage listening to the concerns and needs of guests
- groups in the church practiced outreach to guests and potential members

For one church, these initiatives resulted in numerical growth (though this was not a primary goal), enhanced the acceptance and caring among the congregation, and encouraged more inviting. The emphasis must be on the stranger, not on the needs of the congregation. Involving everyone in the congregation in hospitality as a spiritual practice will benefit congregants and newcomers alike.

Welcome

Visibility

When we think of marketing, we often think about how we can become more known to people who are receptive to our message. Having programs valuable to constituents positions the church to begin to focus on visibility. The following is adapted from Oswald and Leas, who hold that there are things churches can do to increase their visibility:

- physical presence—having a building in an area of traffic is very helpful as a significant factor in attracting newcomers. Maintaining that facility in an attractive way is also important.
- accessibility—not only for the physically challenged, but for able bodied people who may be embarrassed by locked doors or wandering hallways. Clearly marked buildings and hallways, along with greeters stationed at many places can help.
- signs—use clear block letters and large enough to be read from a passing car
- advertising—newspaper ads and publicity, also radio and television
- outreach—serving people beyond the congregation also increases visibility
- inviting—the most powerful way to get people to come to church

Attraction

In Unity, we hear a great deal about the idea of attracting new people when they are ready to come. Many interpret this to mean that we are to do nothing about bringing people in because consciousness will take care of it. It is certainly true that consciousness is a decisive factor—for a community displaying warmth and love will bring people into its fold.

Yet a natural action that grows out of love is that people want to share it with their friends and family. Inviting is a natural result of consciousness. It also happens to be why some 80 % or more of people are currently attending churches. Many people need encouragement to invite their

Unity During Worship

This is when many of the activities take place around welcoming guest in Unity Churches.

Except for one, all churches we polled asked people to stand or raise their hands during the service. Some applaud. At church of Today in San Diego, Wendy Craig-Purcell says she makes sure to tell people they won't have to say anything, and explains what's in the guest packet. While standing, newcomers receive such items as a rosette, carnation, or ribbon. Unity North Atlanta reserves the process by asking guests to stay seated while the congregation packets, carnations and shake hands. A newcomer "meeting" is announced for the end of the service.

Included in the packet, Unity

friends because we have too much fear around the idea of evangelism. (Oswald says that the average Protestant invites someone to church every 27 years!) Friendship Sunday, church business cards for congregants, and simply talking about it are all used by Unity churches to encourage inviting.

Greeting

The main focus for the newcomer ministry is to bring people back for a second time. Why do people return? The most important reason for returning is the perception of friendliness—75 % of the unchurched say the most important thing in finding a church would be friendliness. Further, 90 % of newcomers who think the church is not friendly will not return. This reminds us of the importance

churches mentioned Daily Word, Unity Magazine, fact sheet, form for mailing list, newsletter, Unity principles pamphlet, coupon for buffet lunch and/or audio tape. One church cautioned against including too many pieces in the packet. It may appear to be too "pushy."

Glen Wood of North Spring United Methodist Church in Blue Springs, Missouri, recommends another informal technique. He has trained members to never let anyone sit alone. Many first-timers sit apart from the crowd when visiting a congregation. Members watch for those sitting alone, then move over to them and ask if it is okay to sit next to them. Usually a conversation ensues that begins a friendship. Herb Miller cites this method as most effective for small congregations.

of our first chance to interact with the newcomer. After all, you never have a second chance to make a first impression.

About half of the people in a given congregation have the personality skills to be official greeters. It is best to develop the greeter team from those who volunteer for it, or are selected specifically for their skills. They should be stationed, in pairs, at each entrance before the service and after. For large buildings, post maps at each door so that greeters can assist people in finding the nursery or restrooms. Another interesting idea regarding greeters is to include them in adult classes so that newcomers will feel welcomed in this setting as well.

Hosts

Charles Arn suggests substituting the term "host" for greeter. As is the case with using the term guest, it changes the role in our minds, and extends the responsibility beyond the traditional idea of greeting. Hosts are charged with seeing that guests are made to feel at home. We know that the single most important reason people return is that they perceive the church as friendly. In turn, the main measurement behind guest impressions of the friendliness of the church rests on how many people initiate conversation with them. Studies show this is an area in which the unchurched have a definite, unflattering perception of churches. The burden is on each congregant to make the experience as welcoming as possible to the newcomer—who finds the experience of attending a new church to be a fearful one.

Arn takes the idea further. He suggests that hosts be stationed in several places, including the parking lot, the foyer, the pews, and in the fellowship area. In these locations, they can offer more than greetings—they can offer directions or an escort to the nursery or classrooms, restrooms and sanctuary. They can hang up coats and sit with guests during the service if appropriate. They can invite them to the coffee fellowship and introduce them to other people. Think of the difference in the experience you would have as a visitor in a church like this! If trained properly, so as not to be overpowering, these hosts would create a very friendly atmosphere.

Among the rows

Beyond greeters, there is a need for people in the pews to speak with guests. Perhaps people could be assigned by rows to speak with any newcomers in their area. An idea for those who are greeting is to invite guests to attend the coffee hour following the service. In fact, one of the most important times for guests to be greeted is immediately following the service. One church makes sure members are trained to never leave a guest, but to introduce them to another guest or member. Providing name-tags for all congregants is another enhancement for fellowship.

Assessment

The area of friendliness to newcomers is usually a blind spot for congregations. This is because once we get involved with a congregation, we tend to forget what it was like to be new to it. You can't tell how friendly your congregation is by how you feel as a loyal attendee.

To find out how your congregation appears to newcomers, ask all those who have been new for the last two years for their impressions of the first two times they attended. Leaders must also keep asking themselves, "Is each of us welcoming people in our service?" Roy Oswald once quipped that most church coffee hours are the church's form of "hazing" for the newcomer.

Church of Today, San Diego, held focus groups to find out if and why the church might be seen as unfriendly. In his pamphlet, *The Future of Unity Ministries: And*

What We Can Do To Help Them Grow, Glenn Mosley suggests that the minister call first timers and ask six questions to learn more about how the visitor perceived the church (see his pamphlet for more). The survey mailed with the welcome letter from Unity of Phoenix is yet another way to gather this data. Any of these methods for gathering feedback can be essential to improving the friendliness of the church.

Preferences—first time attenders

George Barna's research shows many preferences of the unchurched. (They are different from the church.) The most popular preferences are "nothing special done" and "members greeted you after the service" (79 % and 78 %). The unchurched also tended to like ushers giving them information about the church, a note from the pastor the week after attendance, a reception after the service, and a follow up phone call from the pastor or church rep, in order of preference. The majority (ranging from 64 % to 72 %) disliked receiving a home visit the week after attendance, wearing a name tag, receiving a small gift delivered to the home, and identifying self during the service—in order of least objectionable to most.

As far as the different generations are concerned, there is a definite difference in their preferences. Busters (born 1965-81) liked getting information from ushers the most of any generation. The church reception after the service, "nothing special done," and a thank you

note from the pastor the following week were next and roughly equal in their preferences. Identifying self during the service was liked by only 10 % of Busters, about the same as wearing a name tag. Boomers (born 1946-64) were strongly in favor of "nothing special done," as were Matures (born before 1946). The pastor's thank you note was next for Boomers, followed by being greeted after the service (also like Matures). The name tag and identifying self were both the least liked by Boomers. Matures liked least having a gift delivered to the home and identifying self during the service. Overall, females and Busters tended to be the most receptive to all methods.

This research is useful as a guide, but keep in mind that many churches use the "unpopular" methods to good effect. Test and assess different methods. If it works for you, use it.

Returning

What were the reasons for visitors returning? In aLifeQuest research project, quoted by Bernhard and Clapp, warmth ranked first. A close second was having a friend in the congregation, or making a friend during a visit. The quality of worship and of Sunday school came in third and fourth, while help in the search for life's meaning, child care, and the building were the last three. Clearly, the quality of interaction with people in the congregation is of utmost importance, and even helps people to return.

Taking names

For churches with greater than 70 people in attendance, systematically collecting names may be the best way to allow for follow-up with newcomers. Many methods exist, but Herb Miller recommends the friendship pad that is passed to the end of each row. The reason is that it gives each person in the row a chance to identify newcomers and to speak with them after the service. It must be described by the worship leader as a friendly behavior (“so that we can get to know you”), increasing the chances that everyone will participate (as opposed to it being a need of the church). Encourage all congregants to include their address and phone number, because it in turn encourages guests to include theirs. Churches larger than 300 can also use a sign up card efficiently. In this case, have everyone fill out a card, members and guests alike. For both the card and pad options, it is necessary to always ask for this to be completed during the service.

If your church has less than 70 attending, sign-ups can be awkward. In this case, Miller suggests having active members who are always there to talk to people and ask their address so that the pastor can send information. About half the Unity ministries we contacted use a guest book, while the rest use a card for sign-up.

Follow-up

The best time for following up is within 48 hours of the first-timer’s visit. Nationally, about 10 % of first-time worship visitors return. This can be increased to 20 %.

Your chances of involving people in the ministry increase with the number of times they return. The goal of a follow-up process is to help cause people to return.

Many writers on the subject recommend a personal visit from a lay person within 36 to 48 hours of the first timer’s attendance. After this, the percentage of those returning drops sharply. If the pastor makes the visit, the results are dramatically reduced. (Many believe this is because a lay visit is less formal, more credible.) In some areas, substituting a phone call or letter for a visit also dramatically reduces the effectiveness (but not always). Yet at least one writer suggests testing a phone call, letter, or lay visit for three months at a time to compare, because results can vary in different parts of the country. We note that this information contradicts the findings of Barna’s research, which gives more reason to test the idea before making it a permanent part of the ministry.

Unity Church of Overland Park has its own set of guidelines for selecting leaders:

- join the church (a simple procedure)
- attend regular Sunday services
- complete Unity Basics I or equivalent
- complete Leadership training

If home visits are your method, they should last a maximum of 15 minutes, in which time the “friendship team” of two people accomplishes several things. First, they express gladness for the first-timer’s attendance. They spend

most of the time getting acquainted, then answering questions about the church. They invite the guest to return next week, and leave a brochure. The friendship team should never call ahead to schedule a visit. If the newcomer is not at home, they leave the brochure with a personal note at the door, and phone the next Saturday to have the same conversation they would have had in person. Many churches add the variation of some type of gift, i.e., a homemade loaf of bread or pie, or a plant.

In any event, as an additional piece, a pastor’s letter to recognize their presence, offer to be of service, and invite them to next Sunday will also help guests to return. Avoid form letters, though hand-written post cards or personally signed letters are effective.

Assimilation

Congregations seeking growth tend to think they need to do more to get people in the door. Actually, many churches have plenty of newcomers. The real challenge is getting them to return and take an active part.

Traditionally, the sequence of events for church involvement began with visiting, then joining, then assimilation. Today’s congregants take longer to join, placing assimilation second in the sequence and membership third, if at all. This indicates a longer period of testing the church before commitment. Keep in mind that people in our society today are trained to look for opportunities to have their own needs filled,

so this makes sense. This is not necessarily a bad thing for the church—it is just different and points to a need for new ideas.

Herb Miller’s research shows that only about 30 % of new members get involved in roles for which they are spiritually gifted. One suggestion is to train a new member involvement volunteer to work personally with congregants to help them identify their areas of giftedness. Providing self-assessment opportunities will benefit the entire congregation.

We also need to discard the idea that volunteers are doing us a favor. When placed well, according to gifts, volunteers gain a feeling that they are learning, growing and a true part of the community. In a warm, accepting climate, they feel appreciated as well. Remember that money is rarely the first thing on a list of key motivators on the job—which tells us that people want to contribute.

Affiliation

Affiliation is the time period during which the newcomer begins to feel accepted into the church—a “courtship” taking from one month to two years. A new member or orientation class can assist in this process—with at least four meeting times. The more people newcomers are acquainted with, the more likely they will affiliate, because friends are what help people to feel at home. The informational aim of this class would be to let the newcomer know what is needed to go deeper into the life of the church.

As new generations make up the

church, there is less emphasis placed on the idea of formal membership. At the same time, many successful churches have clear expectations about what it takes to be a member, leading to higher value being placed on membership. Some cite participation in a class, tithing, and attendance as possible expectations for members. Membership in churches is not what it used to be, and you will find many different ideas about how it should be structured. Perhaps affiliation happens on different levels at different points along the spiritual path. Rick Warren suggests a model of different levels based on commitment and spiritual growth. These levels are tied to the structure of the church and educational opportunities offered. They are as follows:

- Community—the unchurched
- Crowd—regular attenders
- Congregation—members
- Committed—maturing members
- Core—lay ministers

This model allows the church to see what needs exist at each level, and to provide ways of meeting needs.

Roy Oswald identified six points along the path from newcomer to active. Searching, testing, returning, joining, going deeper, and being sent—again, stages that follow a growth in spirituality.

The advantage of systems like these is that they help people to move along the path to their own growth, and they recognize needs at different places along the way. Programs can be designed to fill the different needs of people at different

stages. The discipling process does not end—it continues as long as the individual is connected with the church. This contrasts with the idea of traditional church membership where one joins in a one-time event with no follow-up. Within the first two months, newcomers need to become part of a class or group that meets regularly, and offered a role or responsibility within three to six months (related to giftedness). This doesn’t typically happen by accident. Unless they are assertive and outgoing, people may not feel they are accepted without some steps taken to positively show them. To communicate acceptance, one author suggests that people be asked to affiliate with the church, or to become members.

This is why small group ministry is one of the most important aspects of growing churches today. It creates connections for people, and offers them a sense of community. At the same time it is considered an essential component for personal transformation and spiritual growth. Opportunities for meaningful leadership in the church also benefit participants. For small groups to be accessible to newcomers, at least 20 % of your small groups should have been formed in the last two years. (See also the Marketing Research Bulletin on Small Groups Ministries.)

Implications for Unity churches

Welcoming new people into our ministries is a multi-faceted process.

- Starting with the spiritual aspects

of hospitality will help make all other efforts more successful.

- Welcoming then becomes a method of strengthening the community, not of growing the church in numbers.
- Another step in welcoming is becoming more visible in the community.
- Once people come in the door, they must find a friendly welcome. The goal here is to bring them back. As they return, the chances that they will stay increase.
- Assimilation into the group requires that they are associated with a small group of some type, and have the chance to use their gifts in ministry.
- The idea of formal membership has changed. The emphasis will be on building disciples and offering ways for them to take a meaningful part in the ministry.

Resources

Building and Leading a Magnetic Church, workshop presented by Herb Miller, 1998

Casting the Net, George Barna, 1995

Fellowship Evangelism reprint packet, Net Results

The Future of Unity Ministries: And What We Can Do To Help Them Grow, Glenn Mosley, available from the Association of Unity Churches

“*How to Create Belonging*,” Net Results, September 1998, Rusty Freeman.

The Inviting Church, Roy Oswald and Speed Leas, 1987, The Alban Institute

The Purpose Driven Church, Rick Warren, 1995, Zondervan Publishing House

“*Ten Numbers You Need to Know About Assimilation*,” Net Results, November 1997, Gary McIntosh.

The Vital Congregation, Herb Miller, 1990, Abingdon Press, Nashville

Welcome!, Andrew Weeks, 1992, The Alban Institute

“*Why Do Worship Visitors Return?*” Net Results, Charles Arn, May 1998

Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation, Fred Bernhard, Steve Clapp, 1997, The Andrew Center

Thank you

We are very grateful for the input of these Unity ministries:

Church of Today, San Diego, CA

Detroit Unity Temple, Detroit, MI

Unity of Phoenix, Phoenix, AZ

Unity Church of Christianity, Houston, TX

Unity of Hollywood, Hollywood, FL

Unity of Roanoke Valley,

Roanoke, VA

West Valley Unity

Church, Reseda, CA

Fox Valley Unity, Batavia, IL

Unity Church of Overland

Park, Overland Park, KS

Unity Church of Peace, Chicago, IL

Unity North Atlanta, Marietta, GA



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