

“Assimilation” is the process of bringing people into the life of a group. When new members are assimilated into your church, they feel a part of the church and begin to experience the church's traditions as their own. They feel the ties that bind them in the common identity of your church, and old members accept and appreciate them. For people to be truly assimilated, both the old and the new members of the church must feel that the new members “belong”. All members are then bonded together in their commitment to Christ and by the traditions of your church.

History and Background

The assimilation of members into the Christian community has been a challenge from the beginning. Paul chastised the Corinthians for their divided loyalties and failure to “be united in the same mind and the same purpose” in the company of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10-17). Through much of the church's history people were considered assimilated by being of “the same mind and judgment” doctrinally and by participating in the worship and rites of their tradition without deviating into heresy.

In the recent American Protestant tradition, however, the church has emerged as an organization with education, service and programs of ministry extending far beyond its central life of worship. So assimilation comes not only in

affirming the church's doctrines and in participating in worship, but also in accepting and being part of the total life of the community of faith. Assimilation occurs not when people attend church services and events, nor even when they join the church by confessing or reaffirming a commonly held faith. It happens when they feel that they belong, and become fully accepted and active parts of the body. This is an ongoing and dynamic process and may take different forms. It once took place because people grew up in a church, and its traditions were their traditions. Today, because people move frequently, reaching out, recruiting and receiving new members is essential. Then new arrivals must be woven into the fabric of the church's community.

Common Practices

Some churches feel that a friendly greeting to first-time visitors or new members is all it takes. It is then up to the newcomers to keep on coming and to participate. Most churches do more. They have guest books or attendance cards for newcomers. Many churches place an attendance sheet in each pew for everyone to sign, hoping that newcomers will get to know the names of other members too. They may use name badges for all who attend. Some churches have a plan for telephone calls and visits by members. Some have a plan for members familiar with the church's activities to take a new member's

family in its care to help them feel welcome.

New members quickly discover the smaller groups within churches where interaction, service, common interest and belonging seem to occur: choirs; boards; committees; teams and organizations of women, men, youth, couples and singles; or devotional and study groups. Such small groups can be major positive factors in assimilation. Sometimes they become principal deterrents, because it is difficult for new people to break into these close-knit small groups. Some churches have discovered that one way to help people feel they belong is to have them share in a task. The church's mission becomes their own as they work toward it. One task in which some churches involve new members is ushering where they meet many members.

You can begin discovering how well people are assimilated in your church by considering whether there are any people who have joined the church in the last year who attend worship services, but aren't otherwise involved in the church's life. Are there people who have joined, but who really never became active? It may be that these people have a sense of belonging from their participation in worship, but if that is a pattern, people probably aren't feeling fully apart of the church's life.

Responsibilities

Helping new members become part of the church's life is everybody's

responsibility. Of course, “everybody's responsibility” can easily become nobody's, or only the pastor's. Few newcomers leap into the unknown easily. You must provide entry points. Here are some suggestions of ways to do that:

- Assigning to one group or committee the responsibility of planning ways to assimilate new members.
- Assigning to one group or committee the responsibility of assuring that visitors are welcomed, helped to feel comfortable, and encouraged to return.
- Giving new membership kits with information on the history, beliefs, mission and opportunities for study, service and companionship in the church.
- Preparing a brochure or flyer with information for visitors about the church.
- Conducting orientation sessions for new or prospective members with the church's staff and a wide range of committed lay leaders, who share their dreams for the church.
- Matching each new member or family with a sponsor from within the congregation who invites and brings the new member to church activities, checks on and tries to meet the new person's needs or family's needs, and is on hand at church activities for introductions.
- Posting photographs and biographical sketches of the new people for others to see.

- Using the newsletter as a way to introduce new members to the church family.
- Using nametags for all church activities.
- Nominating new people to boards and committees.
- Using photograph albums of the church family as a way for newcomers to put names with faces.
- Planning a time at each church function for community building activities that help everyone know one another better.
- Planning activities that focus on new members: a new member at each table at a potluck meal, an open house where representatives of organizations explain their purpose, or recognition of new members at an annual meeting.
- Providing position descriptions telling duties, accountability, training available, and support for each volunteer position in the church. While people who have been around a while may know all the ropes, your ways of doing things may not be so clear to new members.
- Keeping a card on new members through their first year in the congregation, recording participation in worship, groups and special activities, expressed or revealed needs and how the church met them.
- Having a volunteer ministry program that includes a way to discover skills, knowledge and ways people want to participate,

and a way to match skills with positions.

- Designing and sustaining small groups for nurture through study, prayer and personal sharing. Give everyone an opportunity to be part of a small group, not just those who can sing or play sports.
- Making certain that announcements are easily understood. Especially be wary of using abbreviations and first names only, which can make new people feel left out.
- Making sure people don't feel left out because of barriers preventing access by people with disabilities or barriers caused by racism, sexism, ageism or cultural assumptions, such as speaking as if everyone is part of a nuclear family.
- Providing opportunities for new members to serve ex officio on any board for one year.
- Periodically bringing people together and asking what membership means and how their experiences could be strengthened.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Use **Evangelism and Membership Growth Resources** from the Evangelism Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries. See resources at www.ucc.org; order from United Church of Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-free,

800 537-3394. See also resources for Congregational Vitality.

- Read **Assimilating New Members** by Lyle Schaller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1978) for practical ideas.
- Find out what the fastest-growing churches in your conference do.
- Remember what it was like to be new and what helped you most.
- Learn what experiences others have had and build on them, too.

Issues Facing the Church

- The purpose of assimilation is not to make new people just like others in the church. How can your church incorporate people into its traditions, yet be open to new ideas?
- Not only visitors and new members need assimilation. Sometimes people whose situation has changed, such as newly widowed or divorced person, someone who marries a non-member or one who has new religious beliefs, find they need to become a part of the whole in new ways. How can you recognize these people and make them feel they belong?
- Not every church member wants to be part of everything, but some churches may give the impression that members and friends are not fully apart of the church unless they participate in certain “standard” ways. How can you make certain doors are open for

participation without making people feel it is mandatory?

- Our churches have people from diverse religious backgrounds. How can people be assimilated into belief systems as well as activities and worship? How might you modify worship or activities to be more broadly inclusive while maintaining the core traditions of your congregation?
- What are some of the challenges associated with assimilation of diverse traditions and cultures into the life of your church? How might they be overcome?

Questions

- What is assimilation?
- How can you tell whether members are well assimilated into your church?
- What does your church do now to help people become part of the church family?
- What is one thing your church could start doing that it isn't doing now?
- Did these suggestions give you any ideas of ways you could improve the way old members feel they belong? If so, what might you do?