

Growth Points

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That Important First Year

Of all the people who drop out of church, *82% leave in the first year!* The first 12 months is a critical time in the life of new members if you hope to see them around beyond that first year.

Upon further study, we found that while most drop-outs leave in their first year, they do not leave in random fashion. There are two definite “spikes” when an inordinate number of new members stop attending. As it

New people drop out at the sixth and twelfth month points of their first year in a church.

turns out, most new people stop attending six months or twelve months into their first year at a church.

We interviewed 36 people who had stopped attending their church after six months; then another 36 who had stopped attending after a year. “What happened?” we wanted to know. “Could you tell us your story?”

We conducted the interviews, and then replayed the recordings listening for common themes. We found some! New members, it turns out, are asking questions. Often they are not even consciously aware of their concerns at that moment. But in these postmortems, the issues became readily apparent...

During the *first six months* new members are asking:

1. *Can I make friends in this church?* New members who remain active in their church make an average of seven friends in their first year, those who dropped out made less than two.

2. *Is there a place I can fit in?* The more people who are “like

me,” and the more groups where “I might fit” ... the more those newcomers are likely to stay. Common age, marital status, family status, special needs, interests, concerns all help newcomers feel comfortable in their new surroundings. Birds of a feather flock together.

3. *Does this church really want me?* After the warm words of welcome, new members need to be actively and regularly invited to participate in the ministries and activities of the church. If new members conclude that the answer to these questions is “no,” many leave after five to six months. If their answer is “yes,” they stay around...for a *second six months*. But they're still asking questions...

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How many of your new people drop out in their first year?

New people ask, "Does the church really want me?"

4. *Are my new friends as good as my old ones?*

The issue is now not so much quantity of friends, as *quality* of friends. New believers, in particular, feel increasingly uncomfortable with their old behavior, old habits, and old friends. That's good. But they're also unconsciously assessing the value and depth of their new relationships in the church.

5. *Does the group meet my needs?* They may have found a young single's group, a senior adult group, or a Sunday school class of people like them (see the first 6 month question). But 7 - 12 months later, they're now asking whether the benefit of their involvement is worth their cost in time, inconvenience, and social discomfort in this new setting?

6. *Is my contribution important?* The question now is not one of involvement, but of *significance*. Are they doing busy work...or kingdom work? "I wanted to have an impact on people's lives," one drop-out told us. "But all they asked me to do was set up chairs for the church dinner."

Think About It

The answer to the question "What can we do to help new members make it through the first year?" is easy. Simply do all you can, as a church, to see your newcomers answer "yes" to the previous six questions. Here are a few suggestions related to the questions above; you can no doubt come up with more:

1. Make a list of each new member who has joined your church in the past nine months. Then, over the next few months, make a point to

introduce your new members to others in the church with whom they share things in common.

2. Ask the leaders of classes and groups to initiate a contact with new members during the next few weeks. Encourage the leaders to go out of their way to introduce themselves to the new person/family, befriend them, and introduce them to the leaders' friends in the church.

3. Start new groups and classes so that new members can participate. The value of starting new classes and groups is that they focus on specific needs, which is why new members will join.

4. Make a point to individually meet with new members (individually, or with a couple) every three months for a "check-up." Look for clues related to the above six questions new members ask in their first year.

As you monitor the involvement of your new members, you will see fewer people dropping out in that critical first year.



Adapted from Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn's best selling book *What Every Pastor Should Know* (Baker Books, 2013).

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