
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Building a Loving Community

Everyone wants to be part of a loving church. Here are some ideas on how to build a loving community.

First, nurture an atmosphere of acceptance and love among the people. Walk into any church and you can sense the atmosphere. While it is hard to put a finger on what atmosphere actually is, it is easy to feel it, especially when one is a recent newcomer. Atmosphere is created by the sounds, smells, colors, lighting, and noisy buzz of people gathered in a close space. It is especially noticeable in the welcome or lack of welcome newcomers receive, the willingness of people to talk to strangers, the laughter that wafts over the conversations. The makeup of the worship team sends a strong signal of acceptance or of rejection to people as they observe the ages, ethnicities, and personalities of those on the stage.

Second, offer a small group ministry to build community. Developing a network of small groups within the church community is a necessity. People are looking for close personal relationships. Intimacy is a key value, and for this reason, small groups are an extremely important aspect of church fitness. Small groups must be designed

for a variety of needs: study, personal growth, ministry, worship, pastoral care, evangelism, and special needs or tasks. Nearly all fit churches have at least one support or recovery group. While a small group ministry does not guarantee that a church will be fit, a church will be limited without it. Typically, in fit churches over two-thirds (70%) of the members attend a small group, and they talk positively about the level of spiritual care they receive.

Third, welcome and follow-up with guests well. One of the most overlooked areas of church fitness is the design of a welcome and follow-up process. The church, more than any other organization, should be open to welcoming and connecting with newcomers. Fit churches take full responsibility for incorporating guests into the loving community by designing an intentional flow of ministry that touches on the following six areas of ministry. Connecting: Helping new people understand and become a part of the church

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beyond Sunday morning worship. **Growing:** Helping people grow spiritually as they use their gifts in service. **Learning:** Helping people learn their own unique talents, passions, and gifts. **Matching:** Helping people find an appropriate place to serve inside or outside of the church. **Coaching:** Helping people develop in their ministry experience. **Recognizing:** Helping people celebrate the way God has made them and used them in ministry.

Fourth, help people make friends in the congregation. People will drive a long way to connect with a church that provides substance beyond simple words like “We care” and “We’re glad you’re here.” While most churches are friendly, what most people want are friends. Thus, fit churches organize ways to help people build friendships. It may be programs (e.g., Dinner Eights), or creating centers for community (e.g., some churches are rearranging church facilities to create several places for people to gather casually), or stressing involvement in small groups. But, fit churches realize people must find at least seven friends in a church if they are to remain for a significant period of time.

Fifth, handle conflict well. The stresses and strains created by changes in a growing church quite regularly lead to conflict. In some cases, the conflict is simply between a few people, while in other cases it is church-wide. Yet, fit

churches have found effective ways to handle conflict in a responsible and biblical manner. In most situations, the board of the church has received some training in conflict resolution, and is thus prepared for situations that may arise. Leaders deal quickly with issues rather than letting concerns reach a pressure point that may explode into larger conflict. People are encouraged to not listen to criticism, but to encourage critics to speak directly to the persons being criticized. The pastoral staff and visible leaders model healthy respect and support for each other, even when everyone does not agree. Leaders hold to the principle that “Those who know don’t talk; those who are talking don’t know.”

Sixth, provide regular opportunities for fellowship and community. The early church devoted much energy to “fellowship,” which was seen in the fact that they regularly “were together” and took “their meals together” (Acts 2: 44-46). As a result, the believers “were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). There is no doubt that the busyness of our society makes it difficult for God’s people to spend time together. Thus, fit churches provide multiple ways for people to gather in fellowship. Some churches provide low cost meals at church on a week night. A few churches with enough space have started food courts to encourage worshipers to stay around after the worship service and talk with others.

Which of these ideas are you already using? Which ones can you improve? Which ones do you need to start this year?

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What Every Pastor Should Know

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Rule #11: Give higher priority to second-time guests than to first-timers, and to third-time guests than to second-timers.

Rule #19: The sermon is not the message, the message is the service.

Rule #26: One hundred percent of new members should have a sponsor.

Rule #44: When people learn how to listen, they are learning how to love.

Rule #55: The effective life span of a ministry program is fifteen years.

Rule #66: For every one acre of land, a church will have 100 people in worship attendance.

Rule #74: One dollar of every ten should be spent on local community outreach.

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