

The Seven Laws of Assimilation

By Allen Ratta

Law #1 -Visitors Represent 100% of Your Church's Growth Potential

This first law sounds so simplistic and self evident that one could reasonably wonder why it is mentioned at all. Nevertheless, this first law is the beginning point for effective visitor retention and ironically; it is the one that is most commonly ignored by churches. While it is highly likely that pastors give mental ascent to the first law, it is far less likely that they conduct ministry as if they truly believe it. Churches that fully buy into Law 1 will focus the appropriate level of energy and resources on attracting and retaining visitors. Others will tend to focus more of their resources and energies inward, towards their congregation. Sustained church growth requires a sustained investment outwards, towards your visitors.

Law #2 -Visitor Retention is Far More Significant than Visitor Volume.

The mathematics of church growth, like all mathematical constructs, is unyielding in its objective reality. Those who embrace the veracity of this law will enjoy effective visitor assimilation with predictable long-term results. ConnectionPower's Church Growth Calculator™ clearly demonstrates in scenario after scenario that visitor retention is somewhere between 10 to 20 times more significant, in terms of church growth, than visitor volume. Yet churches tend to put all of their outreach resources into "the one basket" of increasing visitor volume and very little into visitor retention. Most churches allocate their church growth resources into Yellow Page ads, purchasing demographic data, conducting large community events and mass mailings, all of which are very expensive and only target visitor volume. This one-sided investment is often due to the difficulties inherent in developing and sustaining an effective visitor retention ministry.

Law #3 - It Takes People to Reach People

Programs do not reach people. Mass mailings, impassioned pulpit announcements, multimedia and slick advertising collateral are not enough to reliably connect newcomers into "places of belonging" in your church. While these kinds of materials can be helpful in assimilation, they are no replacement for the person-to-person connections where visitors experience personal care and the love of God. Accordingly an effective visitor retention methodology must incorporate a plan to recruit, train, mobilize and motivate church adherents to personally care for outsiders.

Law #4 - Set Expectations and Meet Them

People do not like surprises, excepting the occasional party from very close friends or family. Be honest with your visitors about your intentions from your first contact with them. Set clear expectations. Visitors are generally very appreciative and happy to receive a phone call from the church if the church has been forthright about their intentions. While it can be argued that filling out a visitor card is a tacit permission slip for follow up contacts, it is always best to be upfront about your contact intentions. This candor begins with expressing your desire to connect newcomers to your church while asking them to fill out and turn in visitor cards to the way they are addressed at your guest center. Set expectations that you are a caring church and then fulfill them with loving contacts. It works!

Law #5 - Be Proactive to Connect People

Visitor assimilation begins as a matter of stewardship towards those whom God brings to the front doors of your church. Without intentional effort, a church will become more and more focused inward on its congregants. This is a natural sociological phenomenon. Laypersons and leaders in a church will never automatically prioritize their attention on outsiders. It takes

intentional leadership to transform a church from a passive mindset to a proactive posture towards outsiders. This transformation takes more than a good ministry methodology. It requires a new belief system and enough faith in that system to translate belief into actions. The pastor is the key to this transformational process. A proactive/outward focus takes time to develop precisely because it is a process. It requires a journey to move from mere mental ascent to true faith, in Law One. True believers will then care enough to divert attention away from longstanding comfortable relationships and begin to invest time in the strangers who come to their doors.

Law #6 - It Takes Time to Win People

The research shows the more a visitor visits a church the greater the odds are that they will eventually become a part of that church. Yet, churches consistently behave in ways that ignore this critical fact. For example, churches often place all of their efforts in the first time visitor. Reality is that churches will receive a far greater return on investments that they make in 2nd and 3rd and subsequent visitors. What is lacking in many visitor assimilation efforts is the ability to direct and mobilize key resources to repeat visitors. Sustained follow up is essential to effective visitor assimilation.

Law #7 - Listen to Your Visitors

The adage is true that it is impossible to see yourself in the same way that others see you. The same principle applies to a church, only in greater measure. Over time churches become places that are comfortable to insiders and future direction is largely driven by their needs, wants and desires. Insiders feel at home so they assume that outsiders should feel the same way. It is no wonder that there is often a stark contrast between the way insiders and outsiders view the same church. Insiders cannot possibly have an accurate view of the way outsiders see them without a solid and reliable feedback mechanism in place. The information that this kind of mechanism generates helps church leaders to understand the context and the makeup of their local mission field. This in turn provides an informed basis to manage for growth.