
Linking to the Church



Core Values Series

BARBARA BROUWER

*And the Lord added to their number
daily those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:47)*

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We thank Barbara Brouwer of Elmhurst, Illinois, for writing this booklet.

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LINKING TO THE CHURCH

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Introduction

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

—Acts 2:47

Babe had a Roman Catholic background. Her neighbor invited her to Coffee Break. A few weeks later she attended a church service. She said that I gave her a big smile when she walked in, and right then she knew that she wanted to join. She told me that January 7, 1990—the day when she publicly professed Christ as her Savior and became a member of our church—was one of the happiest days of her life.

—Marcia Mels, Orland Park, Illinois

Coffee Break Ministry Goals

1. That participants who are not Christians will come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.
2. That participants who are Christians will grow in their relationship with Jesus through Bible study and Christian friendship.
3. That participants who are looking for a church home will become active in and join the Elmhurst church family.

—Coffee Break Bible Study,
Elmhurst CRC, Elmhurst, Illinois

Aside from leading a person to Christ, perhaps the most gratifying experience any Coffee Break leader can have is to help a person or family from Coffee Break join her church. How satisfying to see people take this significant step in their spiritual journey! Gratitude mixes with joy as they display God's work in their lives and learn what it means to be a part of Christ's body.

Linking Coffee Break members to the church is not the primary goal of Coffee Break.* Coffee Break is an evangelistic ministry. Its primary goal is to link men, women, and children to Christ. But evangelism has never been the only goal of Coffee Break.

In the New Testament, church membership was always the "next step" on a person's spiritual journey. When people believed the message of the apostles, they were added to the church (Acts 2:47). Wherever Paul and the other missionaries preached, those who believed were gathered into churches. But many people today, even those who call themselves Christians, do not consider church membership necessary or even desirable.

The purpose of this booklet is to explore the importance of church membership for those whose lives are touched by Christ through the ministry of Coffee Break. We will consider the relationship of the church and Coffee Break, whether church membership is important for those who come to Coffee Break, and how we can help Coffee Break participants move into church membership.

*I am including Coffee Break, Story Hour, Little Lambs, and Outreach Nursery under the designation "Coffee Break."

PART 1

Why Belong to the Church?

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

—Acts 4:32

The necessity of membership in the local church is never questioned in the New Testament. It is taken for granted. Had we asked the believers of the Apostolic period whether it was essential to join a church, they would not have known what we were talking about. Every believer became a member of a church.

—Alva J. McClain, quoted in
What the Church Is All About

In discussions about church membership today people will sometimes insist that “you can be a Christian and not go to church.” Is this true? It certainly does not appear that this was a question in the New Testament church. Yet today, twenty-three million adults in North America call themselves Protestant Christians but have not joined any church (*How to Warmly Welcome and Effectively Enfold People in Your Church*, p. 15). Why is the church so important? And what makes membership in the church vital for every believer?

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.

—*1 Corinthians 1:2*

In our world, bent under the weight of sin,
Christ gathers a new community.
The church is the fellowship of those
who confess Jesus as Lord.
She is the Bride of Christ,
his chosen partner,
loved by Jesus and loving him:
delighting in his presence,
seeking him in prayer,
silent before the mystery of his love.

The church is a gathering of forgiven sinners
called to be holy, dedicated to his service.
Saved by the patient grace of God,
we deal patiently with others.
Knowing our own weakness and failures,
we bring good news to all sinners
with understanding of their condition and with
hope in God.

—*Our World Belongs to God*, A Contemporary
Testimony, Articles 37, 38, and 42

The church is the body of Christ in which believers and their children are called to actively serve God and one another. When people believe the gospel and become a part of God’s kingdom through Jesus, they are qualified for inclusion in the visible church here on earth. This is the Bible’s teaching.

The Bible also teaches that the church has a singular task in the world: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). The church’s primary job is to evangelize the world by baptizing and teaching new believers. We see this most plainly in the book of Acts, which describes the birth and development of the early church, where believing individuals and families brought the good news to others. The churches faithfully supported the missionary work of Paul and his colleagues.

Jesus’ love for his church is like a groom’s love for his bride on their wedding day. He is passionate, jealous, and totally committed to her well-being. He will do anything for his bride. Because of his great love for the church, Jesus “gave himself up for her” by paying the ultimate price for her sin with his own blood (Eph. 5:25). The church functions as

Christ's body—his hands and feet, eyes and ears in a needy world. Christ, in turn, is her head. He lovingly leads the church and guides her to do his will in the world.

Every Christian is a member of the invisible church, or simply “the communion of believers,” as theologian Louis Berkhof describes it. But there is more. Being a part of Christ must also be expressed in membership in his body on earth, the visible church. Members of local churches all around the globe make the invisible church visible to the world. They experience the abundance of community that Christ has promised to those who follow him (John 10:10).

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you define the church?
2. What is the purpose of the church?
3. How important is the church to Jesus?
4. Review the description of the church from *Our World Belongs to God* at the beginning of this section. Underline the words that refer to the church as a community. Note-the relationship of Jesus and the church. What can-you discover here about the characteristics of church-members?

CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

It is not good for the man to be alone.

—*Genesis 2:18*

We will never realize the likeness of Christ in our aloneness; we will never transform the world as individuals; we will never discover the fullness of life in Christ if we stay solo. Community is never optional—it is a necessity for being what God designed us to be.

—Julie Gorman, *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups*

Human beings are created in the image of God. The Bible tells us that God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In his very nature God lives in the context of relationship. Since we are created in the image of God, we are created to live in relationship or

in community. By living in community we fully realize and express our identity as people created by God.

Living in community offers many benefits to the believer. In community, believers are mentored by other Christians who model the Christian life. Believers care for others and they, in turn, are cared for. In community they are challenged and held accountable. They discover their spiritual gifts and are given opportunities to use them in service.

The concept of community is expressed in the metaphor that the apostle Paul uses when speaking of the church: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, . . . so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:4). No part of our physical bodies can function properly without the other parts. For example, a hand cannot write without nerves and blood and muscles. Neither can a Christian function fully without the presence and support of the other members of the body.

Every member of Christ’s body is necessary. Paul emphasizes this truth in his teaching on spiritual gifts. No one person has all the gifts, yet all the gifts are necessary for doing the work of the kingdom. When believers in Christ join together to use their gifts in the church, then God’s work is accomplished and his kingdom grows. The mandate of the church, to be God’s agent of reconciliation in the world, requires believers to work together.

This notion of community is foreign to our North American individualism. How many people who succeed by “making it on their own” are revered in our cities and towns? How often does “self” play the primary role in our decisions concerning lifestyle, family size, and vocation? The fast pace and busy-ness of our society also hinder community. The demands of community—on top of all the other things we think we have to do—are just too much.

Writing in *Among Friends: You Can Help Make Your Church a Warmer Place*, James Hinkle and Tim Woodroof contend,

The greatest danger facing the church today is neither doctrinal nor moral. It is relational. We've lost our sense of family. We avoid sharing lives personally. We no longer see ourselves as a community of believers. The independence and isolation that afflicts our society have now infected the kingdom of God.

Infants who experience the absence of loving parents or caretakers will fail to thrive physically. So it is with Christians who are isolated from the Christian community. They will fail to thrive spiritually if they are not touched by the love of God and the encouragement of other Christians (Hinkle and Woodroof, pp. 26-28).

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is community necessary for people?
2. In what ways does the necessity of community encourage church membership?
3. Can a person be a Christian without belonging to a church?
4. Why might some Christians choose not to belong to a church?
5. How would you answer if your neighbor asked you why a Christian should be a member of a church?

CHAPTER 3

EVANGELISM'S FINAL STEP

Our new life in Christ
is celebrated and nourished
in the fellowship of congregations
where God's name is praised,
his Word proclaimed,
his way taught;
where sins are confessed,
prayers and gifts are offered,
and sacraments are celebrated.

—*Our World Belongs to God*,
A Contemporary Testimony, Article 39

The process of evangelism is not complete until those who have responded to the claims of Christ are active, functioning members of a local Christian church.

—Robert L. Bast, *Attracting New Members*

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks:

The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel;

it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them;

it practices church discipline for correcting faults.

In short, it governs itself

according to the pure Word of God,

rejecting all things contrary to it

and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head.

By these marks one can be assured

of recognizing the true church—

and no one ought to be separated from it.

—The Belgic Confession, Article 29

Evangalism's emphasis on the necessity of a personal commitment to Christ can de-emphasize the need for church membership. Rather, membership in a church is the final step in evangelism. Believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior is an individual act, but becoming a disciple of Jesus happens within the corporate setting of the church. When new believers fail to be enfolded in a Christian church, the process of evangelism remains incomplete. Both believer and body suffer.

According to the Bible, believers live in a relationship both with God and with others (especially other believers in the church). God gave the Old Testament nation of Israel

ten laws to govern their relationships with God and with others. And in the New Testament, Jesus underscored the importance of this dual relationship when he said to the Pharisees, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39).

Paul commends the churches for demonstrating both emphases in their church life: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints . . .” (Col. 1:3-4; see also Eph. 1:15-16; 1 John 3:23).

Belonging to a Christian church enables the believer to love God and to love others, both inside and outside the church. In the church, the believer experiences the love of God and offers love in return through worship. In the church, the believer loves other believers and receives love from them. As a result, the believer is empowered to go out and share that love with others.

Membership in a church may not mean membership in a particular congregation or denomination. We must be sensitive to the fact that many of the people who come to know Jesus in our outreach ministries will choose to join other churches or to remain in their own church. Michelle Pageau, a Coffee Break director in Lombard, Illinois, cautions, “As a former Catholic, my religion was as much a culture as a relationship, and I have seen many Coffee Break women who come timidly to our groups at first, afraid someone would take away that cherished part of their lives.” We need to be aware of this as we disciple new Christians and talk to them about the importance of church membership.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree that church membership is the “final step” in evangelism? Why or why not?
2. What are the three distinguishing characteristics of a true church?
3. How would you answer someone who asks, “What should I look for in a church? How can I know if it’s a true church?”

CHAPTER 4

WHEN COFFEE BREAK BECOMES-THEIR CHURCH

Many women consider our church “their church” just because they attend Coffee Break and they send their children to Vacation Bible School. In their eyes that’s enough to tell others, “that’s my church.”

—Joanne Van Beek, Leduc, Alberta

“You know, this Bible study is my church,” she said. “My husband doesn’t allow me to go on Sunday. So I come here, and my children get taught at the same time. I wasn’t raised in a Christian home, and I have so many questions. Coffee Break has been a lifesaver for me.”

—Sharon Elizabeth Trapp, “Generations of Godly Women,” *The Banner*, May 27, 1992

For some Coffee Break participants, Coffee Break is their church. They may have spouses who tolerate Coffee Break but actively oppose further involvement in church life. For others, Coffee Break is the place where they became Christians, and they see no need to take the next step of formal church membership. Still others may simply feel more comfortable in the intimate Coffee Break environment. For them the larger church context is overwhelming and intimidating.

In many ways Coffee Break is like a church. It offers the opportunity for worship, Bible teaching, prayer, and discipleship, all within the nurturing environment of a small group. But although it is a ministry of the church, it is not the church.

Why? Gene Getz writes that believers need certain vital experiences to help them grow into mature Christians:

They need good Bible teaching that will give them theological and spiritual stability; they need deep and satisfying relationships both with each other and with Jesus Christ; and they need the experience of seeing people come to Jesus Christ as a result of corporate and individual witness to the non-Christian world.

—Sharpening the Focus of the Church

While Coffee Break provides a taste of these things, there is far more for the new member to experience. Full participation in the life of the church will provide the praise, learning, and nurturing environment of the worship service, including the preaching and demonstration of the gospel in Word and sacraments. Full participation brings with it a new sense of calling and responsibility for a larger and more varied sense of God's family—each member belongs to the priesthood of believers and is gifted to serve and contribute to the welfare of the entire body. Full participation helps members under-

stand that they have not simply joined an organization; they have joined a mission and become participants with God in fulfilling his promises. If Coffee Break assumes the role of the church, the Coffee Break participants will reach a plateau in their spiritual journey beyond which they cannot develop. And Coffee Break may be asked to meet needs this ministry is not designed to meet.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does your Coffee Break ministry have participants who consider Coffee Break their church?
2. In what ways is Coffee Break like a church?
3. Why is Coffee Break not the church? Why is the distinction important?

COFFEE BREAK AND THE CHURCH

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

—Acts 15:3

Corporate evangelism is basic to personal evangelism. In the New Testament, the functioning body of Christ set the stage for individual witness. . . . It is difficult to witness in isolation. It is often necessary, but God's general plan is that community evangelism be carried out in the context of dynamic Christianity and vigorous body life.

—Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*

Coffee Break ministries have always been closely associated with the local church. This partnership has benefited both. Coffee Break leaders and directors experience support from their churches in many ways. The church may provide some or all of the following: financial assistance, pastoral encouragement, prayer partners, assistance with preparing the meeting space, drivers, Stephen Ministry leaders, and elder/deacon involvement. The local church is essential to its Coffee Break ministries. But is this a one-sided relationship? How do Coffee Break ministries benefit the church?

Growth is a sign of health. A child's body, an adult's mind, an organization's size—all grow if they are healthy. The church grows by means of its outreach. In many churches, the Coffee Break ministry is the growing edge of the church. A church with an active Coffee Break program has an effective tool to reach neighborhood men, women, and children with the gospel. In turn, Coffee Break provides an entry point into the local church. According to Diane Averill, a Coffee Break director in Hampton, New Hampshire, “a high percentage of our new young couples have been introduced to the church either through Story Hour or Coffee Break.”

Coffee Break ministries serve as a starting point for the church to reach out. Churches are challenged to develop a vision that embraces all that God is doing through their outreach. Church members learn to flex and condition their mission muscles as they staff outreach ministries. New believers energize the whole church; they show everyone that God is real, he is alive, and he is changing lives in the world.

Some Coffee Break ministries may not have the kind of church support that they need to function effectively. How can Coffee Break leaders encourage their church to support their ministry? At the 1994 Coffee Break Convention, Alvin

J. Vander Griend offered the following suggestions for enlisting congregational support:

1. Ask for prayer support from the congregation.
2. Integrate your vision into the vision of the church.
3. Integrate your evangelistic efforts into the evangelism strategy of the church.
4. Connect your ministries with other ministries of the church.
5. Involve your pastor in meaningful ways.
6. Assist congregational members to reach their unchurched friends.
7. Communicate regularly with the congregation.
8. Invite specific congregational members to attend as observers.
9. Plan an annual Coffee Break Sunday.
10. Ask members of the congregations to share the workload.

(See the Appendix for ways to implement these suggestions.)

Despite the fact that church membership is essential for spiritual growth and the fact that the church has largely supported Coffee Break ministries, there has been little movement of Coffee Break participants into church membership. How can Coffee Break and the church bridge that gap?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does your church support Coffee Break? Write a letter of thanks to your pastor, council, building manager, and others who support your ministry in practical ways.
2. How does Coffee Break benefit your local church?
3. What steps can you take to increase congregational support of your Coffee Break ministry?

PART 2

HOW TO BRIDGE THE GAP

Evangelizing congregations have a well-thought-out plan to incorporate new members into the life of the church and to disciple new Christians.

—Kenneth Eriks, *Reach Out and Receive*

When my family vacationed on an island off the coast of South Carolina, we discovered that our island was but one of many barrier islands. To drive back to the mainland, we had to cross a series of bridges connecting these small islands and finally a bridge to the mainland. The church too has its islands of outreach connected by bridges to the mainland membership. In order for people to move from an outreach ministry to membership and incorporation in the church they must cross several strategically placed bridges. It is the church's task to identify, build, and maintain these key bridges. Some of these bridges are invitation, friendship, participation, and incorporation.

At the 1996 Coffee Break Convention, Martin Contant suggested five questions commonly asked by those who are considering becoming a part of a church:

1. Do I fit here? (*acceptance*)
2. Does anyone here want to know me? (*love/friendship*)
3. Am I needed here? (*value*)
4. What is the advantage of joining? (*benefits*)
5. What is required of me? (*expectations*)

Is your church ready to help inquirers answer these questions?

PREPARATION

Hospitality is the art of creating friendly space for the stranger.

—*Hospitality and Assimilation*, Healthy Church series

A church needs to be warm and welcoming in order to receive and enfold people who have been reached through ministries such as Coffee Break. Each church will probably figure out the best plan that fits its personality, building, and so on. But whether it is a greeter in the parking lot or greeters at the door, the welcome mat should be out.

I like to think of the church in the same way I think of my home. When I am entertaining guests I plan for the visit, prepare food, and get the house ready for them. I greet them personally, take their coats, and do everything I can to put them at ease.

I want them to feel so good about being there that they say, “That was really great. I hope I get invited back.”

—Marie Van Antwerpen, Kentwood, Michigan

Is your church ready to welcome newcomers? This is the important first step in building bridges for incorporating newcomers into the life of the church. Somehow, the church needs to develop an attitude and atmosphere that says to the church visitor, “We’ve been expecting you and we are glad that you’ve come” (Ratz, “The Velcro Church,” p. 42). This expectation will permeate every part of church life.

What things are important to visitors? How does your church appear to visitors? One helpful exercise is to visit other churches and see how welcome you were made to feel there. Another is to look at your church through a guest’s eyes.

Start with the church facilities. Is parking adequate and well marked? What can be done to make parking more visitor-friendly? My church has a small parking lot and newcomers often have difficulty finding a place to park. One way we’ve addressed this is to mark two parking spaces near the door for visitors. Another is to ask church members to park on the street, allowing for more parking in the lot for visitors.

The nursery is another vital area. Visitors using the nursery often will base their opinions of the entire church on the quality of its childcare. Is your nursery easy to find? Is it clean, well-equipped, and adequately staffed? Has your church taken precautions to guard against child abuse? (For more information on this, contact CRC Pastoral Ministries.) Parents expect quality childcare; they will be put off if this is not provided.

Other things to look for include the following:

-
- Are directional signs placed at strategic places in the church?
 - Is there a designated information booth?
 - Do you have a church brochure to give to guests?
 - Are there people at the door of the church to welcome and direct guests?
 - Are there ushers at all entrances to the auditorium, and do they stay on duty long enough to help latecomers? This applies not only to Sunday services. Coffee Break ministries should also make sure that their weekday ministries display the same kind of visitor awareness. Do newcomers to Coffee Break know which door of the church to enter? Can they find the nursery easily? Is there someone available at the door to welcome and direct?

Once visitors have successfully navigated the parking lot and found the nursery, how will they respond to your worship services? Are your worship services sensitive to those who are visiting? Are guests recognized and welcomed in the service? Is the service announced or unannounced? Are the page numbers for the Bible reading announced? Announcements to guide the congregation through the service may seem unnecessary to longtime members, but they are vital for visitors and create a user-friendly atmosphere in the service.

Another place that should be visitor-friendly is the church school hour. Are the children's classes open to visitors? Are church school teachers open to visitors? Are there extra materials for the children who visit? How do teachers inform the church staff of visitors? Adult classes too should be ready to welcome visitors. Each adult class should have a host to welcome visitors and to help them fit into the class.

While the church facilities and worship may be sensitive to the visitor, it is a harder thing for church members to

develop a mission mentality that actively seeks out and welcomes guests. A welcoming church needs to have members who are willing to accept people as they are, who display spiritual humility (recognizing that all people, members and guests alike, are sinners in need of grace), and who have a desire to make guests feel welcome and at home.

At times, Coffee Break leaders may feel like lone rangers in evangelism. This is where the pastor and council play a vital role. In casting the vision for the church, the leaders must have a heart for the unchurched, the church visitor, and the new member. This comes in formal vision statements and in consistent, persistent pastoral reminders and modeling. Coffee Break leaders can encourage this by communicating to the pastor, the council, and the church at large what the Lord is doing in this ministry and by offering to serve on committees that establish policy and procedures. Also, Coffee Break leaders can sponsor workshops such as “How to Warmly Welcome and Effectively Enfold People in Your Church” or “Winsome Ways” that can educate the congregation and encourage a focus on evangelism in your church (call CRC Publications at 1-800-333-8300 for more information).

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do guests experience when they visit your church?
2. How could your church become more visitor-friendly in the areas of facilities, worship services, church school, and other church programs?
3. What barriers keep your church from becoming more visitor-friendly? How might these barriers be overcome?

LET'S DO IT

1. Visit a church that you have never visited before and notice what they do, or don't do, to make visitors feel welcome.
2. Talk to someone who has visited your church recently. What were his or her impressions of your church? What suggestions would he or she make for improvement?
3. Sponsor a churchwide workshop such as "How to Warmly Welcome and Effectively Enfold People in Your Church" or "Winsome Ways" (call CRC Publications at 1-800-333-8300 for more information).

INVITATION

Lutheran church historian Martin Marty says that one word defines the difference between churches that grow and churches that don't: *invite*. Seventy to ninety percent of persons who join any church in America come through the influence of a friend, a relative, or an acquaintance.

—Herb Miller, *How to Build a Magnetic Church*

In my second year of Coffee Break . . . I was introduced to the idea of a prayer partner and Marge and I started praying together. . . . About this time, Marge asked me to come to church service with her. . . . I remember sitting in the front row with her and her family with tears welling up inside of me as I heard the Bible being preached. How

refreshing to hear the Bible's viewpoint on life issues. . . . Membership soon followed.

—Cyndi Davidsen, Elmhurst, Illinois

The first bridge is the invitation—to Coffee Break or to church. When we invite someone to join us in any activity, we need to be convinced that the activity is worthwhile. Why do you belong to your church? What is it about your church that makes you want to share it with others? Every church has its good points.

Those who do not normally attend church will often do so on Christmas and Easter. These holidays are good times to invite friends. The beginning of a new sermon series by your pastor is another good time to invite a friend, neighbor, or Coffee Break participant to church. A sermon series on marriage caught the attention of Marnie Wegg of Orland Park, Illinois. She says,

Pastor Gerry began an evening series on marriage. Boy, did I need that, so I began attending Orland's evening services. I grew to love the concept of this church. These people loved Jesus Christ. I could feel the work of the Holy Spirit in this church and the pastors.

Information about church services and other church activities can be made available in a low-key way through announcements or Coffee Break newsletters. Leaders can target people in their groups who may be open to an invitation, remembering that invitations need to be accompanied with offers to meet them at the door and sit with them in the services.

Another area that can be publicized for visitors is your church's education opportunities. Is your church planning a class on family issues that would interest people outside

the church? When my church had parenting and marriage classes, we invited participants in our outreach ministries to attend. Several women used this class as an opportunity to introduce their husbands to our church.

Does your church have a prayer ministry? Invitations can be extended to participants in outreach ministries to share their prayer needs with the prayer ministry of the church. A prayer request box placed in an obvious place in the foyer of the church makes it easy for people to make their prayer requests known. Recently Elmhurst (Illinois) Christian Reformed Church mailed letters to people in the neighborhood offering to pray for their needs. Many people from the neighborhood responded to this invitation, grateful for the opportunity to have their needs presented to God in prayer.

What does your church do once someone visits a service? Do you have a plan for identification and follow-up? Many churches identify visitors through friendship pads that are passed down the pews during the worship services or visitor cards that are placed in the pews or the bulletins. Others assign people to identify visitors and seek them out after the service for a special welcome. Once visitors have been identified, they should receive a letter, phone call, or a visit by a calling team or the pastor during the following week. In his book *How to Build a Magnetic Church* Howard Miller recommends that lay visiting teams make follow-up visits to church visitors. He suggests this “36-hour principle”:

When laypersons make fifteen-minute visits to the homes of first-time worship visitors within 36 hours, 85 percent of them return the following week; within 72 hours, 60 percent return; within 7-days, 15 percent return. If the pastor makes the call instead of laypersons, cut each result in half.

While Miller’s argument is persuasive, such a home visit would be considered intrusive in some communities. Each

church must evaluate the culture of its neighborhood and decide on the best follow-up method.

All of this suggests that there must be a plan and a person (or team) to effectively follow up church visitors. While we do not wish to place undue pressure on guests, we must recognize the increasing isolation many people in our society feel today. A recent *Net Fax* reported that “the U.S. is a nation of disconnected people and the result is that people of all ages are desperate to make connections and to find a place of belonging, someplace where they can experience and be a part of community.” The church is uniquely qualified to address this need more effectively than any other organization. The church alone provides connections not only with other people, but also with God.

Invitations to attend are the first bridge into the church. The next is the bridge of friendship.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What good points about your church can you emphasize when inviting someone to visit?
2. What can the outreach ministries of your church do to extend invitations to church activities?
3. How does your church respond to church visitors? How can you improve?

LET'S DO IT

1. Include information about your church services and activities in your Coffee Break announcements and newsletter.
2. Consider asking your church to start programs for children who “graduate” from Story Hour.
3. Begin praying about someone you could invite to your church.

FRIENDSHIP

People often drop out of a church, not for lack of faith, but for lack of friends.

—*Hospitality and Assimilation*, Healthy Church series

Mary persuaded her husband Mark to join her for worship at the church where she attended Coffee Break. Because the Coffee Break leaders were alert and attentive, Mark was introduced to some other young men who worked in his field, and he immediately felt comfortable and at home. While he knew nothing about the church and its beliefs, he knew a lot about what the guys were talking about, and he felt linked to them.

—Marie Van Antwerpen, Kentwood, Michigan

Friendships are the “glue” that help people become a part of the church. While the person who initially invites the guest to church has a continuing responsibility to that person, the guest must develop other relationships as well. A fully incorporated member of a church will be able to identify at least six or seven people in the congregation as friends.

Small groups play a vital role in incorporating people into the life of the church. Linking visitors with a small group of people with whom they can meet on a regular basis provides them with a sense of belonging and a place for support, discipleship, and accountability. It is best if the small group is composed of members of the church as well as visitors or new members.

Relationships can also form in church education classes. Guests joining a pastor’s class will usually meet others in a similar place in their spiritual journey. These people become their friends. They will seek each other out on Sunday mornings. Adult classes on family issues can also help guests connect with people who share common interests.

Social activities are important ways for guests to get acquainted with others in the church. Church dinners, picnics, and sports nights offer interaction and build friendships for members and visitors. Sports teams, such as basketball, softball, and bowling, can also help to integrate visitors and members. They are good places for friendships to begin.

Relationships take time and effort, but ultimately they form the strongest bridge to Christ and his church. Harriet Boerman, a Coffee Break leader in Berwyn, Illinois, illustrates this beautifully:

Mary came to Coffee Break while her two children were in Story Hour. Mary was very defensive. Her husband wanted her to discontinue after a few

weeks because he felt the children were being brainwashed. At that time our Coffee Break was small and I spent a lot of time with her socially. As she continued, her husband, Ken, became interested but he had a lot of questions he wanted answered. We began having family times together—picnics, dinners, and so on. Mary began going to church with her children, who soon began challenging their dad: “Why do we have to go, if Dad doesn’t?” On occasion Ken would come, but he really wasn’t ready. Mary made a commitment to Christ and professed her faith in Christ at our church. She and the children attended regularly.

About a year later we began a men’s Coffee Break and Ken decided to try it. He still had many, many questions and presented a real challenge. But after getting involved with other Christian men and other seekers, his defenses began breaking down. He began studying his Bible more and finally also made a commitment to Christ.

They’ve since moved to Ohio, where they are now involved in a small rural chapel where they’ve had leadership roles. We’re still friends. I believe one of the key elements in bringing that family to Christ was the time my husband and I spent with them as a family. They knew we genuinely loved them, cared for them, hurt when they did, rejoiced in their joys, listened to them, and guided them.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the factors in the stories of Mary and Mark and Mary and Ken that connected them to Christ and to the church?

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2. Why is friendship so important in linking people to the church?
 3. What are the barriers to friendship with visitors and new members in your church?
 4. How can the bridge of friendship be strengthened in your church?

LET'S DO IT

1. Appoint someone on your Coffee Break staff to be a liaison with families who are unchurched. This person could help unchurched women find programs and people in the church where they and their family members could link up. She could also alert the church when special needs arise in any of these families.
2. Sponsor a social activity that could promote relationships between people who participate in your outreach ministries and the people of your church.
3. Read *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Zondervan, 1994) by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg. Ask to have the video series be included in your church's adult education curriculum.

PARTICIPATION

Many people today are interested in “testing the water” before formally becoming members of a congregation. They want to participate in church activities and ministries such as singing in the choir or working in the food pantry before making a formal commitment to church membership.

—*Net Fax*

We believe it’s critical for newcomers to become involved in the church’s ministry as quickly as possible. In fact, we feel that until newcomers assume some ministry responsibility, they won’t feel emotionally one with us. They will think of the church as “them” rather than “us.” Newcomers must not only feel wanted, but also needed.

—Calvin C. Ratz, “The Velcro Church”

When people move from being nonchurched, non-Christians to being church-ed Christians they are faced with two barriers—the faith barrier and the church barrier. Typically we expect the faith barrier to be crossed before the church barrier. But recent research shows that those who are brought to faith through the church are more likely to stay with the church than those who are brought to faith in a nonchurch setting. Willow Creek Community Church is a prime example. This mega-church in suburban Chicago appeals to seekers as it draws them into the church before challenging them on faith issues. People will come to church in all phases of their spiritual journeys. A church intent on meeting the spiritual needs of its community must develop a ministry strategy that addresses all phases of faith development.

What does this mean for linking people to the church? One obvious implication is that we must open our church activities and service opportunities to members and guests alike. All groups (except the church council) should be open to participation by all who are interested—for example, the girls' and boys' clubs, the youth group, service activities, and all adult activities. One Coffee Break participant testifies that the second “seed” in her spiritual journey “was planted when my son Ragnar was allowed to become a Cadet (member of the church's boys' club), no strings attached.”

Regular guests should have access to the resources of the church for spiritual and material help. They should be encouraged to serve in ministries that fit their gifts, abilities, and spiritual maturity. The church can increase its sensitivity to the needs of new members by including them on church committees. In his article “The Velcro Church” Calvin C. Ratz puts it this way: “We've worked at including at least one relatively new person on as many committees as possible. The new person's interaction in the committee is a

refreshing reminder to old-timers that newcomers think differently and must be taken into consideration.”

The educational ministry of the church is another area where newcomers can get involved. People today come to church with little Bible knowledge or spiritual training. If the church is to responsibly “make disciples,” it must define its expectations for those who wish to become members and also provide meaningful opportunities for newcomers to learn in the areas of basic Christian beliefs, Bible study, spiritual gifts, and evangelism. The small group setting, including pastor’s classes, offers the best place for seekers to ask their questions and receive answers in a nonthreatening environment.

The story of Mark and Mary illustrates how this can work:

When Mark and Mary came to church they were invited to one of the adult Sunday morning discussion groups. This group used Coffee Break materials, and it was a great place to nurture Mark and Mary as a couple. In addition, they became part of the pastor’s class, and through the Word and Spirit, they came to faith in Jesus Christ and into full membership in the church. They in turn chose to be part of the evangelism team so they could share their love for the Lord more effectively.

—Marie Van Antwerpen, Kentwood, Michigan

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What factors helped to link Mark and Mary to the church?
2. Why might it be important for regular guests to be invited to participate in church activities and ministries prior to membership?

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3. Are your church activities and ministries open to all who are interested? What might you do to make them more accessible?

LET'S DO IT

1. Ask that regular guests be included in the church directory and church mailings.
2. Talk to your pastor about how all activities and programs in your church can be open to guests as well as members.
3. Become familiar with the content and schedule of your pastor's new-members' class.

INCORPORATION

Three primary needs must be met if newcomers are to truly and fully belong. They must develop friendships within the church, . . . become part of a group within the church, . . . and find a meaningful task or role to fill.

—Robert L. Bast, *Attracting New Members*

Being enfolded into Elmhurst Church involved several things. One was the core group of friends I met at Coffee Break. Another was getting involved in VBS as a camp leader and in leading children's worship this year. But one of the most important ways I felt enfolded and welcomed into our church was finding sisters in Christ to share my life with, and no longer having to travel this journey alone.

—Cyndi Davidsen, Elmhurst, Illinois

The goal of all this activity is incorporation into the body of a local church. This means more than formal membership that comes with a profession of faith in Christ. An incorporated member is one who participates regularly in worship, takes part in a small group, serves in a ministry capacity, and supports the work of the church financially. The incorporation process is continuous. It begins when a person first visits the church and continues after he or she has formally joined the church. The church's ongoing responsibility to new members is to ensure that they find meaning in worship, relationships in small groups, and fruitfulness in service.

What does your church expect of its members? Willow Creek Community Church lists five essential spiritual qualities of a Christian:

- **Grace.** Christ-followers have abandoned their attempts to earn God's favor through their own accomplishments and have individually received Christ's free gift of eternal life—by his grace alone through repentance and faith.
- **Growth.** Christ-followers have an ever-increasing desire to nurture their spiritual development through authentic prayer, sincere worship, and application-oriented Bible study. In addition, Christ-followers are so grateful for God's grace that they want to share it with others through personal evangelistic endeavors.
- **Group.** Christ-followers enter into the community of believers so that they can grow in Christlikeness, express and receive love, and carry out the ministry of the church. This means not only participating in corporate gatherings of the church . . . but also being related to a small group of believers.
- **Gifts.** The church isn't an organization as much as it's an organism, an interdependent community of

believers who selflessly offer their unique, God-granted talents for the purpose of furthering the ministry of the church.

- **Good Stewardship.** They strive to be responsible caretakers of what God has entrusted to them, giving generously as they increasingly submit their resources to his authority.

These characteristics are exciting and ambitious. The church should be ready to receive visitors not only with a sincere welcome and opportunities for participation, but also with a vision for what guests who become fully incorporated members can become in Christ—disciples equipped to make a difference in the world.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would your church describe what it means to become a fully-incorporated member?
2. Willow Creek Community Church has identified “five Gs” of a growing Christian. Would you add or delete any? Explain.
3. What factors led to Cyndi being incorporated into her church?

LET'S DO IT

1. Work with your pastor and council members to define a path to move people into membership in your church.
2. Identify opportunities for new members to be incorporated into your church's ministry.
3. Ask that a spiritual gifts class be included in the adult education curriculum to help new members discover their gifts and use them in your church. (An excellent resource is the book *Discover Your Gifts and Learn How to Use Them* by Alvin J. Vander Griend. Call CRC Publications at 1-800-333-8300 for more information.)

CONCLUSION

As I page through my church's directory, I am gratified to see the names of people whose first contact with the church was through an outreach ministry. Many have become fully incorporated members, faithful in worship, and active in small groups and ministry. Among them I see

Cyndi, a Coffee Break assistant leader and children's worship director;

Rebecca, who is active in Little Lambs and is a former children's worship director;

Melody, a member of the Little Lambs staff, leader of an aerobics ministry;

Dianne, who edits and publishes the church's monthly newsletter; and

Ed, who attends Bible study and is an active evangelist.

I pray that your church might have this experience. It takes prayer and planning. I realize that it may seem too intentional, too “pushy” for your Coffee Break members. But the real issue here is that churches need to develop a vision and a plan for outreach that responds to the Spirit’s work in the lives of all people who come to the church through its outreach efforts. While this is God’s work and it occurs on his timetable, he has, nevertheless, commissioned the church to evangelize and disciple. He expects us to be ready and involved.

Every congregation needs a structure that identifies and integrates newcomers into the fabric of the church, and a vision that encourages all members to bring seekers into a saving relationship with God and his church. When that happens, then our churches, like the early church, will experience the joy of the Lord adding to our number daily those who are being saved (Acts 2:47).

APPENDIX

In the course of writing this book I sent questionnaires to Coffee Break regional representatives and directors. Many of their responses deserve to be shared with you—they include practical suggestions for increasing church support and linking outreach participants and guests to the local church. My thanks to all who responded and shared their ideas.

INCREASING CHURCH SUPPORT FOR COFFEE-BREAK/STORY HOUR

- Pastors announce the needs of Coffee Break members as part of the announcements in our Sunday worship services and pray for them in the congregational prayer. This gives church members the information, and many of them will send encouragement cards to these folks.

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- One of our pastors holds healing services following Coffee Break several times each year (for staff and class members).
 - Many of the staff have prayer partners from the congregation.
 - We recruit ten families or individuals from the congregation who commit to pray regularly for Coffee Break. Each month they receive a prayer letter informing them of current prayer needs and of answers to their prayers.
 - In the fall we hold an evening and a morning coffee for church women. We show the video “Someone Needs You” from CRC Home Missions and have several Coffee Break women give their testimonies about what Coffee Break means to them. We also give the church women a tool to use to invite their neighbors—a plastic mug filled with Hugs and Kisses candy, a packet of instant coffee, a tea bag, and a magnet with all the Coffee Break/Story Hour information printed on it. The mug is wrapped in cellophane gathered at the top with a pretty ribbon and artificial flower. Attached to the ribbon is a fold-over card with our Coffee Break/Story Hour information. We have found that if you have something made and ready to give out, people will use it as a reason to stop over and invite a neighbor with a gift, rather than just a verbal invitation. These mugs are available at all times at the information counter in the church lobby and are used throughout the year by church members and Coffee Break attendees to invite friends, coworkers, and neighbors.
 - During the Mission Conference this year there will be a mission museum in our fellowship hall with exhibits by the missionaries our church supports. Coffee Break/

Story Hour has been asked to have an inter-active exhibit as it is part of our church's mission outreach.

- We do a Coffee Break Sunday where the whole service is geared towards Coffee Break and its women and children.
- When we started our Coffee Break program in 1995, we enlisted prayer partners, hostesses, and cookie bakers as well as leaders, assistant leaders, and nursery workers. Many people became involved and the ministry became a churchwide effort.
- Each month we put news about Coffee Break and Story Hour in the church newsletter. This keeps the congregation aware of what God is doing through their outreach ministries.

LINKING COFFEE BREAK PARTICIPANTS TO THE CHURCH

- We have a hospitality room after every Sunday morning service with a host and hostess who provide a friendly welcome and information (oral and written) about our church.
- The church should have a system of meeting special needs new members may have.
- Services need to be contemporary. Courses and adult education should contain subjects that are relevant to community people.
- We supply information about our services, our ministries, and special events such as our Christmas musical, Christmas Eve and Easter services, as well as VBS. When making announcements I will invite women to these special events and hand out written material with specific information.

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- Our pastors make themselves accessible on Wednesday mornings during coffee time. Many neighborhood women enjoy talking to them. They also visit Coffee Break members (or a member of their family) if they are in the hospital.
 - The deacons invite our neighborhood widows to their Christmas luncheon.
 - Our Social Seniors (over 65) invite our Coffee Break women to join them. They do a great job at making them feel welcome.
 - We inform our women about Cadets and GEMS and they in turn have the kids inform their moms about Coffee Break.
 - The pastor writes in our newsletter.
 - The church Ladies' Bible Study invites Coffee Break women to a social/fun night.
 - Church members help care for or provide meals for some Coffee Break members (nonchurched) who are ill.
 - We invite the Coffee Break women to the church women's retreat and help those who can't afford the cost.
 - When Coffee Break participants attend church, they are greeted warmly by the Coffee Break staff, and we try to introduce them to others in the church.
 - Our church is divided into zones, and zone leaders are contacted when there is a need in a Coffee Break family that is in their geographical zone (dinners, calls, notes, visits, baby-sitting, and the like can result).
 - Several Stephen Ministry leaders are caregivers for Coffee Break women.
 - Church school classes pack gift/food baskets for children and families whose names are given to them at holidays by the Coffee Break/Story Hour staff.

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- Many Coffee Break children attend our church school/ Cadets/GEMS/Children in Worship (even though they are not church members). This involves extra work for the Coffee Break leader to convey the fact that these new children are from an unchurched background and come with very little Bible knowledge. Some may need male role models if they are from a single-parent home, or they may have other special needs. We have to pave the way for the children and be enthused encouragers to church members involved in these ministries. They really look to us to help them practice evangelism.
 - During Summer Coffee Break we often have one morning set aside as “Ask a Pastor Day.” The women turn in questions they have about Bible passages, beliefs, family relations, and almost anything they’ve wanted to know about how God fits in their lives. One of our pastors comes for the morning and addresses these questions, as well as questions asked orally that morning. It is a wonderful bridge builder, and it also gives our pastor a morning around the Coffee Break table with the women.
 - Each Sunday we have a church zone potluck, and this is a great way to bring Coffee Break visitors to a time of fellowship around the table.
 - When invited to a “home party” hosted by a Coffee Break woman, take a guest from the church along with you as a way to meet a neighborhood Coffee Break woman’s circle of friends and family.
 - Network with persons in your church who have children the same ages as those of the Coffee Break neighborhood women and whose children attend the same schools. Then when the Coffee Break family visits the church, they will see familiar faces.

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- We plan to start a weekly jazzercise program in the next month. This will be for Coffee Break and church and neighborhood women.
 - Use the talents, gifts, and professions of the church members to assist Coffee Break families (job opportunities, counseling, teaching skills).
 - We requested mailboxes for Coffee Break regular visitors so they get all the church handouts, news, etc. It is surprising how this makes our church “their church” when they speak of it! We also list their names in the church directory when they visit regularly.

Note: These suggestions came from the following churches: Brookside CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Elmhurst CRC, Elmhurst, Illinois; Trinity CRC, Artesia, California; Western Springs CRC, Western Springs, Illinois; Lombard CRC, Lombard, Illinois; New Life CRC, Abbotsford, British Columbia; Orland Park CRC, Orland Park, Illinois; and Ebenezer CRC, Luduc, Alberta.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Becoming a Contagious Christian by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1994. (Also available as a video training course. Order from Willow Creek Resources, 1-800-876-7335.)

Discover Your Gifts and Learn How to Use Them by Alvin J. Vander Griend. CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1996.

God's "One Another" Plan by Henry Admiraal. CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1988.

Hospitality and Assimilation. CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1992.

How to Warmly Welcome and Effectively Enfold People in Your Church. CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1988.

Ten Things Every Council Member Should Know About Hospitality and Assimilation. CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich., n.d.

Winsome Ways Workshop. CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich. Contact 1-800-266-2175.

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