

6 Questions From Newcomers

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The critical questions newcomers are asking about your church

Of all the people who drop out of church, our studies indicate that a whopping 82 percent leave in their first year. Like a new baby entering the world, that first year is critical to the survival of the new believer and new member.

Further study indicates that people do not leave at random times throughout that first year. Rather, we see two definite “spikes” at which time an inordinate number of newcomers simply stop coming. We interviewed 36 people who had stopped attending after six months, then another 36 who had stopped attending after a year. “What happened?” we asked. “Could you tell us your story?”

As they talked, we listened for common themes and discovered certain questions newcomers are asking in the first 12 months of their church involvement. Often, they are not even aware of their actual concerns. But in these “post-mortem” conversations, the issues became readily apparent.

The First Six Months

1. “Can I make friends in this church?” This is a question of *belonging*. Other studies tell us that newcomers who stay make an average of seven new friends in the church during the first six months; those who drop out make less than two. While it’s true that the first impressions of being a “friendly church” have much to do with a first-time visitor returning, the question has now changed from “Are they friendly?” to “Can I make friends?” I’m impressed that the “friendship factor”—more than any other ingredient in the connections and retention mix—is key. To put it simply: Those who make friends, stay; those who don’t, don’t.

2. “Is there a place I can fit in?” This is a question of *acceptance*. Churches with a variety of affinity groups (common interests, age, gender, marital and family status, concerns, needs, dreams) have a much higher retention rate than churches without such “entry paths.” And the more characteristics group members share in common, the better the fit and stronger the glue that will keep them connected.

3. “Does this church really want me?” This is a question of *personal value*. After the initial words of welcome, are these newcomers actively invited to participate in the roles and ministries of the church? Is their opinion sought on policy and vision decisions? Unfortunately, churches have a tendency to go on with business as usual and ignore the creative ideas and new energy bubbling just under the surface in newcomers.

If the answers are, “Yes, I have made some friends in this church,” and “Yes, there is a group I’m feeling comfortable in,” and “Yes, these people really do seem to be glad I’m here,” then newcomers generally stay. If, after five to six months, their answers are “No,” they often decide there are other things they could be doing.

If their answers are “Yes,” however, newcomers are still asking questions. The jury is still out.

The Second Six Months

1. “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 more and more uncomfortable with their old behaviors, old habits and old friends. That’s good. But they are also unconsciously assessing the value and depth of their new relationships in the church.

2. “Does the group meet my needs?” They may have found a young singles group, a senior adult class or a home Bible study of people like them (see the First Six Months questions above). But seven to 12 months later, they’re now asking whether the benefit of involvement is worth the cost of time, inconvenience and social discomfort in this new setting.

3. “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 help change people’s lives,” one person told us. “But all they asked me to do was set up chairs for the all-church dinner.” People want to connect with something that matters. The hope of many newcomers is that they can find that through the church. It takes them less than a year to decide.

What experience are people having in that first critical year at your church? Are they finding acceptance, community and significance? What could you do to come alongside them as they ask these questions?

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