

OCCG-006 Involvement's Role in Closing the Back Door

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When the goal of congregations is retaining members, most church leaders acknowledge the importance of involving members in ministry as soon as possible. Some members will even say to leaders, "Use me, or lose me." The million dollar question is, "How do leaders implement programs that foster congregant's involvement?"

In this article we provide scriptural motivation for involvement leadership, and discuss practical ways to employ every member in meaningful ministries of the church. I also share currently used strategies by the Fifth Ward Church of Christ in Houston, Texas that have significantly increased the retention rate.

KEY WORDS:

Assimilation, Closing, Gifts Involvement, Ministry, Service

Remove the Shackles

According to Ephesians 4:11, one of the primary responsibilities of evangelists, pastors, and teachers, is to equip saints for works of service. How leaders define "works of service" will greatly impact willingness to solicit involvement from members. Jesus divinely demonstrated that service always involves meeting the needs (not wants) of others. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind, and ministered to the mistreated. Meeting the needs of people was Jesus' doorway to attracting audiences for the Gospel (John 6:2). Service is simply meeting the needs of others.

Could it be that many members do not get involved because leaders limit what Christians can, and are willing to do?

I have been guilty of assuming most members require much priming to get involved. In Tom Rainer's book, "*High Expectations*," he reveals the opposite is likely true. According to a massive research project of 287 churches, the higher expectations placed on members, the greater the likelihood members would stay and be involved. In other words, most members are waiting and hoping someone will ask them to do something. Go figure. Leaders blame members for not getting involved, and members blame leaders for not providing opportunities.



1 Peter 4:10 affirms every baptized believer has a special gift from God, and is compelled to use it in service to others. Our members do not have the miraculous gifts of the apostles and Jesus, but they have unique gifts that are waiting to be unleashed.

If followers are not involved, is it their fault, or the leaders? Have we placed shackles on would-be-workers that God has not

placed? If meaningful involvement will dramatically close the back door, as stated by Thom Rainer and other church growth researchers, should leaders not remove, or at least loosen the shackles?

Involvement and gifts are a match made in heaven. To ignore God's order to employ these gifts is to ignore a primary tool to close the back door. *"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God,"* 1 Peter 4:10.

Care must be taken that churches remain mission focused, that is, every involvement should have as its' ultimate goal to save and keep souls, and be a blessing to others. If we adhere to the instructions of the inspired word, more opportunities will be created to fulfill God's purpose for the church.

Perhaps the prevailing and qualifying question leaders should continuously ask is, "How can particular gifts of members be used to serve others, encourage the body to remain faithful, and share the good news of Jesus and his Kingdom?" If a servant's gift aids one of these purposes, shouldn't pastors commit to using that gift?

Below I summarize currently used strategies that have increased the Fifth Ward Church's retention rate significantly over the past three years. By no means do we proclaim to have solved this common dilemma of retaining members. Our average Sunday morning attendance is 900 – 1000. Yearly new members have averaged 150 (75 baptisms, 75 transfers) the past five years. Our retention rate has been a dismal thirty-five percent over this period, but we are encouraged that our

retention rate has increased by about thirty percent over the past two years. If we retained all our new members, we would need a new facility.

Strategies:

1. Communicate the mission and vision of the church. Teach lessons in Bible classes and from the pulpit on the importance of every member's involvement in works of the church. Paint a vision that gets members excited about being a part of a church that is making a difference in the community and the world. Set tangible goals that call for members to stretch.

Example of Mission Statement

God's Mission is Our Mission: Making and Maturing Disciples.

- To present the Good News of Jesus Christ to our community, the Houston area, and beyond
- To bring glory and honor to the God and his church through righteous living and good works to the needy of our community, the Houston area, and beyond
- To equip members with the necessary tools for spiritual transformation to the image of Christ



2. Assess and utilize gifts. We placed the attached gift assessment survey in our

Sunday bulletin for members to fill out. The response was tremendous. One sister came to me after completing the survey and said she certainly hoped the leadership was serious about utilizing members' gifts. She was an artist. She stated she wanted to use her gift to edify the congregation and reach out to the community. I asked what she had in mind.

She wanted to craft an art exhibit with the theme, "Light of the World." I asked how this exhibit could be used as an outreach to the community. She said she would identify other artist in the congregation and ask her non-member artist friends to donate art pieces that spoke to the theme. We would promote a day to invite the community, family, and friends to the grand opening of the art exhibit. Our elders agreed to provide a room for the exhibit, and one of our elders provided oversight and support for the project.

The result was astonishing. Twenty members of the congregation who previously were not very involved became fully immersed in this ministry. The exhibit was outstanding, and portrayed a clear message that Christians are to be lights in the world.

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MATTHEW 5:13-16
LIGHT

Over one hundred non-member guests attended the grand opening. A brief prayer

devotion preceded and ended the proceedings. Guests were invited to services and other activities of the church. One non-member who donated paintings for the exhibit started visiting Sunday services. One month after the gallery grand opening, Alton Cooper was baptized into Christ. He currently plays an integral part in our newly established Spiritual Arts Ministry.

A few questioned the art exhibit as a gimmick. All I know is Alton Cooper would have never set foot on Fifth Ward Church of Christ campus without this outreach. Of course, leadership plays a vital role in ensuring ministries are not mere social gatherings. I can report that none of the members in this ministry have drifted out the back door.

Other ministries that have been instrumental in involving more members include tutoring, gardening, cooking, computer training, caregiving, and handy work. All the ministries are encouraged to invite guests and look for opportunities to share the Gospel.

The size of a congregation should not be the criteria that determines ministry involvement. Gifts and resources should determine ministry involvement. If a twenty-five member congregation consists primarily of gifted cooks and farmers, focus on an outreach that utilizes these talents.



3. Report Victories. Acts 14:27 – *“When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”*

Seventy Five guests from our Exercise Class participated in the Fifth Ward church’s 5K Walk for Life. Eight of the guests attended Sunday service the next day. The cooking class prepared 200 lunches for University of Houston college students. Arnold Endamne, who was recently baptized, was one of those students. The Garden of Eden Ministry will provide free fresh vegetables on Saturday for any veteran that stops by.

Do not underestimate the power and effect of victorious stories of conversion and involvement. Members love to hear that their efforts are bringing forth fruit. We use the weekly bulletin, pulpit announcements, and a monthly newsletter to report good news to the entire church.



4. Act swiftly. Wisdom should be used in seeking the involvement of new converts in teaching ministries, but experience has compelled us to attempt to match the gifts of new converts to a work as soon as possible. New members are given a list of ministries in orientation and asked to circle the ones they have interest in. The ministry leader is then asked to contact the member to answer questions and provide information. We have found this to be a critical and effective process in getting new members involved quickly after conversion. We have attempted several different methods in the past to get members involved. With the help of God, our strategies over the last few years have improved our retention rate, but any method requires a strong commitment from leaders and good old fashioned hard work. Feel free to contact me, or one of our elders, if you have questions about anything I have discussed.

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Reference: High Expectations by Tom Rainer