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**Assimilation: The Touch, See, & Hear Approach
to Integrating People into Your Church**

Danny Von Kanel

Assimilation, that process by which the church welcomes, receives, and enfolds the believer into the body of Christ and involves him/her in service, is in essence—living out Christian acceptance. Moody tells this story. “In Chicago a few years ago a little boy attended Sunday school I know of. When his parents moved to another part of the city the little fellow attended the same Sunday school, although it meant a long tiresome walk each way. A friend asked him why he went so far, and told him there were others just as good nearer to his home.

“They may be just as good for others but not for me,” was his reply.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because they love a fellow over there,” he replied.

Churches across our land are having struggles “loving a fellow over there”. Though they may initially coddle their entrance into the fold, they struggle at keeping them. They are failing to assimilate people. Yet, others have found the secret to effective assimilation. I want to tell you about three churches who have been successful in integrating folks into church life. They are: Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; Highland Park United Methodist, Dallas, Texas; and Idlewild Baptist Church, Tampa, Florida. All three use what I would like to call—the touch, see, and hear approach.

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Touch

I'm defining touch here as the actual physical contact with other people. Coral Ridge does this with their Blue Vests (teams working on two shifts on Sunday morning, welcoming visitors, and answering their questions); Cookie Calls (homemade cookies delivered on Sunday afternoons for first time visitors that morning); Visits By An EE Team (visits in homes); New Member Luncheon (luncheon on day of reception of new members (VIM–Vitality Informed Members)); and New Member Carry-in Supper (informal opportunity for questions and answers with Pastor Dr. D. James Kennedy).

Staff member Robert Dillard says, "It is difficult to imagine any effective growth (*at Coral Ridge*) without weekly EE teams following up visitors". Physical touch in the home is a key trait to Coral Ridge impacting others through assimilation.

Highland Park addresses the assimilation issue of touch through new member greeters and "all church" greeters. New member greeters caress all new members who joint each Sunday, present new member packets, and get them to reserve seating. "The team of 60 "all church" greeters", says Cathy Morgan, assimilation minister at HPUMC, "assist those getting off the buses, and generally helps those in need or with questions upon arriving at the church." Though smaller in scale than Coral Ridge, never-the-less, it highly effective as evidenced by its 13,000 and growing membership.

Idlewild Baptist church provides a physical touch through a trained team of invitation counselors. Kevin Miller, Minister of Assimilation at Idlewild says they, "Begin the process (of their assimilation) for those who respond to an invitation at the end of every worship service. A personal touch and important information is presented to them at this time."

Similar to Coral Ridge's EE Teams is Idlewild's weekly evangelism FAITH teams who make visits to those who have visited worship or Bible Fellowship (Sunday school). Idlewild does not use cookie calls nor fellowship dinners but they do have a quarterly reception. As with Highland Park's greeters and Coral Ridge's blue vests, Idlewild uses a hospitality team that greets people upon arrival. All three employ a loving handshake, smile, and knowledgeable members to give direction, help, and hospitality.

See

Using the sense of sight, all three churches employ effective visual techniques to enhance assimilation.

Coral Ridge uses the visual of a fresh plate of cookies, not to mention the delightful taste of being newly baked. Seeable teaching tools, whether print, poster, or overhead, are used during their New Member Classes which feature what they believe, history, and vision. On VIM Sunday (Vitaly Informed Members), a photo session, info packs, and gifts enhance the overall visual of what the church has to offer. The church uses food to its best advantage with a new member luncheon with sponsors and staff on the day of reception (VIM Sunday) and a New Member Supper following a week or two later in the home of one of their members.

Highland Park also uses their New Member Orientation to catch the eyes of new members as laity and staff present information regarding areas of ministry, church tour, as well as discuss specifics related to the United Methodist Church. They also use a special event, a ministry fair "Discovery Sunday", in late August to give visual displays for areas of ministry. A unique visual feature of their orientation process is the highlighting of upcoming events and opportunities through video presentations.

Idlewild Baptist is not to be outdone in this area. They too provide visual encounters through a required pastor led Membership class. Kevin Miller says, "In four hours, we are able to indoctrinate our new members into our church culture, educate them about our mission and vision as a church." Though no fellowship dinners, a quarterly reception is held. Idlewild features photos of new members in a bi-monthly magazine called the Lamp.

Hear

All three churches provide a wealth of information that church members and visitors can absorb and know. This hearing aspect of assimilation is critical to integrating people into church life.

Coral Ridge uses this hearing approach by having D. James Kennedy share the gospel and the five means of growth in grace in their New Member Classes. They understand that when the pastor speaks, people listen. At the New Member Carry-in Sup-

per, Dr. Kennedy again meets for an informal verbal exchange of questions and answers.

Coral Ridge also realizes that spoken words of care and interest by their EE teams to visitors is critical to reaching people. Information shared at a New Member Class, according to Bob Dillard, "is vital for informing potential members of the commitment level required." In addition, Coral Ridge uses His Touch Ministry to make phone calls to all members to assess needs and to pray with them over the phone. Members are called twice a year. Their goal is to reach everyone quarterly.

At Highland Park, information is presented at New member Orientations so that new members will be kept aware of all that is happening in the church. Additionally, follow-up calls to each individual attending are made to see if they have any other questions. Highland Park also uses the telephone in the capacity of a telephone greeter. They focus on new members who have joined the church within the last year, and who have not gotten "plugged in" to areas of ministry.

Highland Park employs an ongoing contact with new members. They currently track new members for a period of one year through personal calls, e-mails, letters, etc. Cathy Morgan says, "They seemed to be pleased that they have not been forgotten once they joined."

Idlewild conveys spoken information for others to hear and grasp through their invitation counselors, pastor led membership class, baptism orientation, FAITH Team visitations, quarterly new member receptions, and their ministry placement process. Though no telephone calls are made to welcome visitors, some Bible Fellowship classes do call. Their Life Change University offers ongoing courses for spiritual maturity and development—offering information that helps close the back door to escaping and disengaged members.

When I asked the three assimilation ministers what worked best for them in assimilation, this is what they said:

- "It is difficult to select just one thing that has worked best for Coral Ridge. But it is difficult to imagine any effective growth without weekly EE Teams following up on visitors. Thom Rainer of The Southern Seminary of Louisville has also pointed out that high assimilation is tied with high expectations. A new member class or Inquirers class is vital for informing potential members of the commitment level re-

- quired." Robert Dillard, Coral Presbyterian
- "Opportunities which have been the most successful are: Orientation Process, What's Your Passion (for new members who want to learn where they might serve. This class presents a spiritual gift assessment and helps them define their personal ministry through their gifts and passion), and Ongoing Contacts with New Members." Cathy Morgan, Highland Park United Methodist
 - "I would have to say the mandatory Membership class (*has been most effective*). In four hours, we are able to indoctrinate our new members into our church culture, educate them about our mission and vision as a church." Kevin Miller, Idlewild Baptist

All three churches use what I've chosen to call the touch, see, and hear approach to assimilation. The more a church uses the senses to engage people in what they are about, the greater the possibility exists for keeping, integrating, and nurturing people in church life. These three churches have proven it works. So can you.

Writer

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