

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Church Systems: From Church Attenders to Committed Church Members

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to
the Faculty of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By

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Lynchburg, Virginia

December 2023

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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American churches are in decline, with attendance dropping below 50 percent for the first time in 2021. The need for revitalization cannot be overstated or underestimated. Luke's historical narrative in Acts 2:42-44 is an ecumenical prescription for a healthy, growing church today. This project seeks to determine the theoretical structure and biblical foundation necessary for churches to achieve healthy, sustainable growth. This study aims to develop and initiate a strategy with biblical *praxis* that will guide church attenders to an urban church in Columbus, Georgia, through a process to become committed church members. The aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of six strategic steps designed to turn newcomers to the church into regular attenders into members through assimilation. The intent is to discover a biblical approach to help this church and other churches with a similar context grow spiritually, numerically, and healthily. Therefore, this research project examines the currently available literature on church growth, church health, and congregational systems to discover models and practices that might help this church become more effective in reaching the lost for Jesus Christ and keeping them. The church will leverage a systematic approach that relies on the weekend service to implement six steps that are believed to meet or exceed the expectations of newcomers when they visit. With an effective follow-up and qualitative questionnaire, the church seeks to discover the level of satisfaction churchgoers have toward implementing the church's systems approach and use their feedback to change, modify, or adjust the current strategy.

Keywords: church decline, church membership, newcomers, revitalization, systematic strategy

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Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| DMIN | <i>Doctor of Ministry</i> |
| GWC | <i>Gateway Church</i> |
| IRB | <i>Institutional Review Board</i> |
| NIV | <i>New International Version Bible</i> |
| NKJV | <i>New King James Version Bible</i> |
| SHP | <i>Standard Hospitality Procedure</i> |

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

American churches are in decline and urgently need revitalization. Church membership in 2021 dropped below 50 percent in Gallup's poll eight-decade trend for the first time. In 2020, 47 percent of Americans said they belonged to houses of worship. This number is down 3 percent from 2018 and 23 percent from 1999.¹ Furthermore, the Barna Group, a Christian polling organization, reported that the “Rate of decline is much steeper for women, particularly those in the older age group.”² According to Barna, in 2003, half of women thirty-five and older attended church at least once a week. By 2019, that number declined to just three in ten. This trend is significant because younger women are more likely to attend weekly.³

Additionally, the effects of the pandemic exacerbated stats, causing a mass exodus of evangelical Christians from the church of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the rapid rise in biblical apathy among Christians parallels the steady decline in church attendance, resulting in the shift from a biblical to a secular or non-biblical worldview. Glenn S. Sunshine argues, "Fundamental to a person's belief system is their presuppositions or worldviews about life; that is, what it

¹ Jeffery M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” The Gallup Poll March 2021: Accessed May 20, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963>.

² Ryan Burge, Guest Column: “Behind the Steep Decline in Church Attendance Among Women,” The Barna Group (March 2020): Accessed May 19, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/changes-behind-the-scenes>.

³ Ibid.

means to be human, which presupposes certain core beliefs about God, the world, truth, and morality.”⁴

The shift in worldview is attributable to the overall decline among churchgoers. Polling over the last decade indicates that people’s views have changed. According to the Barna Group, “Half of all adults now contend that Christianity is just one of many options Americans choose.”⁵ Moreover, post-moderns identify themselves with no religious affiliation at all. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, insists that postmodernism is “the belief that everything can be explained objectively through the scientific method—postmodernism advances the idea that there is no such thing as objectivity.”⁶

The shift in ideologies and worldviews highlights the urgent need for the church to address these trends biblically, practically, and systematically. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-19 is still imperative and demands a fresh look at methodology considering the state of the church. Nevertheless, according to findings of The Barna Group, in cooperation with The Seed Company, more than half of U.S. churchgoers are unfamiliar with the Great Commission. Additionally, even when presented with a list of passages from Scripture, 37 percent cannot identify a familiar passage or recognize the term, Great Commission.⁷

Therefore, this DMIN action research thesis explores strategic steps that take first-time guests, from church attendees to committed members. Membership represents the most

⁴ Glenn S. Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 14, 15.

⁵ The Barna Research Group, “Christianity Is No Longer Americans Default Faith,” (January 2009): Accessed <https://www.barna.com/research/christianity-is-no-longer-Americans-default-faith>.

⁶ Kinnaman, David, “Competing Worldviews Influences Today’s Christians,” (May 2017): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/competing-worldviews-influence-today-Christians>.

⁷ The Barna Group, “The Future Teaching of the Great Commission: A Q&A,” (January 2019): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/future-teaching-great-commission>.

significant opportunity to engage intentionally new Christians in discipleship that leads to their spiritual maturity in Christ.

Therefore, this action research addresses the possibility of structuring the church for sustained numeric and spiritual growth in the current culture. In short, this DMIN action research investigates and creates strategic steps to transform church attendees into fully developing followers of Jesus Christ. Consequently, this chapter describes the ministry context for the Gateway Church, the problem and purpose statements, and concludes with the project's thesis statement.

Ministry Context

The local ministry context for this DMIN action research thesis is the Gateway Church, located in Columbus, Georgia. The researcher and several families are founders of the church. The lead pastor is ordained with the Assemblies of God and serves on the Georgia District Assemblies of God presbytery board. He has over eighteen years of pastoral experience, with fifteen years as a church planter. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Berean University of the Assemblies of God and Southwestern University of the Assemblies of God, respectively. Gateway Church, or GWC, was started in 2007 by a parent church in Columbus, Georgia.

The church benefited from a parent church affiliation for five years. As a result, the church grew to over 250 in attendance in a city with more churches per capita than any other city in Georgia. The church has a contemporary ministry style with a casual atmosphere. The first three years of numeric church growth were the result of having an external focus on reaching the community.

Cultural Setting

The population of Columbus in 2020 was 207,000.⁸ Columbus is a consolidated city-county located on the west-central border of the state of Georgia. Columbus lies on the Chattahoochee River directly across from Phenix City, Alabama. It is the county seat of Muscogee County. Fort Moore, formally Fort Benning military training base, is located just outside Columbus, with a population of about 120,000.⁹ Thus, the population of Columbus and Fort Moore, formerly, The Maneuver Center of Excellence is approximately 337,000 residents. GWC is in the 31907 zip code, with 55,332 residents in East Columbus.¹⁰ The median income is \$41,000 annually, primarily among residents.

The neighborhood is diverse, with predominately African-American residents. The community surrounding the church is well established, with new construction within a seven-mile radius. The demographics of the congregation are representative of the community surrounding the church. GWC is 90 percent African American and 10 percent Hispanic and Caucasian. The church exists to help the city of Columbus become committed followers of Jesus Christ. The casual atmosphere and contemporary worship music support the welcoming environment of the church. The church is a member of the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

The vision for GWC is to build a multicultural, multiracial church that reaches the city of Columbus with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Currently, the church conducts Sunday morning

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau: "Quick-Facts," (July 2021): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Muscogee County, Georgia>.

⁹ The Maneuver Center of Excellence, "*Assignment Content: Welcome Guide*," (March 2016): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://ww.benning.army.mil/infantry/ARTB/Assignment/content/pdf/ACS%20Welcome%20Guide.pdf>.

¹⁰ Demographics, "*Columbus Georgia, ZIP Code 31907*," (2018): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org>.

services, live and virtual, with a midweek Bible study. Furthermore, the church has not developed strategic steps with biblical praxis to take first-time guests from church attendees to committed members.

Structural Setting

GWC lacks a theoretical system that turns first-time guests into returning guests and takes returning guests through a spiritual process from attendees to committed church members. Additionally, the church has no prearranged or predetermined strategic structure designed to take people from knowing Christ to growing in Christ. Furthermore, the church has failed to establish and codify a disciple-making methodology that is easily implementable. Consequently, the church cannot achieve sustainable numerical growth and lacks the spiritual structure to guide new believers on their incredible journey of transformation, where they reach maturity in the knowledge of God and Christ.

The church does not intentionally engage first-time and returning guests in ways that make them feel wanted and needed. Furthermore, GWC's present discipleship methods are ineffective and lack the critical techniques to help the church grow and mature in Christ. Additionally, the church is inconsistent in reaching the community with short-term evangelism and outreach activity. Nevertheless, GWC has a welcoming atmosphere, friendly people, and Christ-centered preaching. The church offers weekly prayer meetings, Bible study, and the weekend church service.

Pandemic Effects

In 2020, GWC broke ground to build a 17,000-square-foot facility on fifteen acres. Simultaneously, GWC agreed to sell its land and building to the Georgia Department of

Transportation (GDOT) at the time that the nation and the world came to the reality of COVID-19 and a pandemic. The pandemic caused an immediate shift economically, relationally, spiritually, and practically in the church. Many African Americans in the church felt vulnerable to COVID-19 and discontinued attending church out of fear for their health and safety.

Leadership was suddenly addressing an abrupt decline in attendance caused by fear of the virus and relocating the church to a temporary meeting space due to the sale of its land and building to GDOT. Attendance fell by about 60 percent within a few months, and the church stopped the capital-building program. Additionally, the church was without a permanent meeting location. The pandemic forced delays in constructing the new church facility, and the current building plans were modified to reflect the modest changes.

Spiritual Setting

Prior to the pandemic, GWC had frequent first-time and returning guests. However, the church failed to track attendance properly. Consequently, the church's follow-up method did not turn returning guests into church members. Moreover, the church lost guests just as rapidly as it gained them. The absence of predetermined steps with biblical praxis to assimilate newcomers to the church was the reason for a lack of numerical growth over the last few years.

Furthermore, the temporary meeting space was inadequate for the growth and discipleship of the church. In addition, it needed to be more inviting for newcomers and more accessible to find. The lack of established structures or systems amplified issues lingering beneath the surface regarding spiritual and numerical growth. As a result, core ministries in the church ceased, staff layoffs occurred, and minimal financial resources were available. The church has three staff personnel and a dedicated elder and deacon board.

Several families who started the church, along with the researcher, are still stakeholders and have an unyielding commitment to the vision and future of the church. Church members support the church and leadership team and continue to support the church's mission. There is anticipation and expectation that God will bring the church out of its "wilderness experience" of non-growth into the "promised land," where the church grows and newcomers want to return. Furthermore, leadership is acutely aware of the need to develop a strategy that consists of biblical principles that intentionally put GWC on the path to sustainable numeric and spiritual growth.

Attendees Setting

Attendees can expect a warm greeting, treated with biblical hospitality, and gracious seating. The atmosphere at Gateway is energetic, and the worship style is contemporary, primarily focusing on glorifying God. The church is seeker-sensitive but not seeker-focused. Therefore, non-Christians would feel welcomed in the service, and the atmosphere is not churchy. Furthermore, the church anticipates the presence of the Holy Spirit and the operation of spiritual gifts during the service. The preaching is both proclamation and expositional, with worship songs that are both contemporary and traditional genres. The church offers two one-hour services on Sundays from 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Attendees can expect a casual atmosphere and some degree of anonymity when the church gathers for worship. Therefore, attendees are not asked to stand up, give, or introduce themselves to the congregation. Instead, visitors are asked to fill out a visitor card with minimal information for follow-up. Returning guests can expect a similar experience.

Problem Presented

There is no foundation of the Christian faith other than Christ and Him crucified! Gateway Church is building on that foundation with a proclamation and expositional preaching on the revelation of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the problem of not turning attendees into committed members persists.

GWC lacks a congregational system that consists of strategic steps with biblical principles to help first-time and returning guests mature in Christ by participating in the church's ethos. Christ was clear when He said, "Go into all the world and make disciples" (Matt 28:19, New International Version). A mature disciple is a committed follower of Jesus Christ. Moreover, discipleship in the Christian sense is the process of teaching someone to model Christ in character and lifestyle.

Mature disciples' hunger for God and want to know Him more. They adhere to God's Word and are intentional in their efforts to live free from the allure of sin. The discipleship process is transformational and seeks to accomplish this in the life of God's people. However, spiritual formation is not automatic. Jesus was intentional with His disciples. He invited them to freely lay down their lives, pick up their cross, and follow Him. He promised a transformational experience that changed their lives forever.

In the same way, GWC desires to make insiders out of outsiders with an intentional ethos. However, the church's current strategy lacks intentionality to produce engaged followers of Christ. Furthermore, the church lacks the processes that systematically engage participants at each level of their spiritual progress in Christ. The problem is that Gateway Church lacks a theoretical system to guide guests through the process, from attenders to members.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to develop and initiate a strategy with biblical steps designed to help attendees become committed church members. A committed member of Gateway Church is committed to the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, and the church's mission. The objective is to assimilate newcomers to the church with predetermined strategic steps that connect them to the congregation while becoming a new creation in Christ. The strategy begins with the retention of guests to the church and culminates with returning guests becoming responsible church members.

This research project is intentional in its efforts to create engaging and welcoming environments where first-time guests would be eager to return. Returning guests will go through a process called assimilation. It is a systems approach to make insiders of outsiders in the church's faith community. In the church, assimilation will accomplish four primary functions: (1) seek to bring believers together for corporate worship; (2) seek to connect attendees and members in the church for doctrinal teaching, prayer, fellowship, and encouragement; (3) Seek to provide an opportunity for the church to gather for short-term missions, outreach, and personal evangelism through volunteerism; and (4) seek to model biblical generosity and encourage others to support the church's mission. Thus, the assimilation system seeks to implement the biblical transformation strategy in the church. This research aims to get guests consistently returning to the church while strategically moving them into a more profound commitment to Christ and spiritual growth.

The church seeks to create and implement a congregational system that fulfills the Great Commission (Matt 28:19, NIV). Therefore, a congregational system must be theologically based and strategically designed for practicality. Gateway Church proposes assimilating first-time and

returning guests through a strategy toward membership. The membership level is where regular guests are ready for responsibility in the church. Church members become stakeholders, leaders, and those committed to the church's mission. Therefore, this DMIN action research intends to design a systems approach to discipleship that accomplishes the Great Commission with attendees and members.

Furthermore, membership level is where returning guests have a sense of belonging and commit to the church's mission. A desire for membership provides the church with a unique window of opportunity for Salvation and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Membership level is where the church can seek a "buy-in" from attendees to become indispensable church members. Furthermore, strategic steps with fundamental biblical praxis help members grow in their faith and commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission. In short, the church that develops a unique theoretical system with biblical steps to help newcomers to the church become committed followers of Jesus will likely be healthy and growing.

Basic Assumptions

First, the researcher assumes that since the Great Commission is the single most important task given to the local church by Jesus Christ (Matt 28:18-20), church members are involved in making disciples. The second assumption is that leadership at GWC is responsible for numerical and spiritual growth. Therefore, elders, deacons, and staff will help the congregation mature in the knowledge of God in Christ through preaching, teaching, discipleship, fellowship, and evangelism. The third assumption is that stakeholders will collaborate to clarify and implement a systems approach to take first-time guests from attendees to committed members. The fourth assumption is that the church will implement a systematic approach through assimilation to accomplish the stated purpose of this research. Finally, the

assumption is that new strategic discipleship steps will help GWC grow numerically and spiritually.

Definitions

This thesis project will use the following definitions throughout unless and otherwise stated. Terms selected and added in the subsection that follows are for additional clarity.

Assimilation. Assimilation is the act of bringing something into resemblance. It comes from the Latin word meaning similar. Therefore, assimilation is bringing people into closer resemblance. McIntosh and Martin argue, "Assimilation begins right at the heart of our need for relationship."¹¹ Assimilation is the process the Gateway Church will employ to take first-time and returning guests from attendees, with no connection or commitment to the body, to church membership, where the feeling of mutual belonging exists between church members.

Biblical Hospitality. Essentially, biblical hospitality is to treat strangers and friends alike. It is welcoming others into their homes and lives. Furthermore, hospitality is a sacred duty of Christians (Matt 24:34-46). Biblical hospitality is used in this action research and is critical to helping first-time guests become returning guests. This principle will be referenced, evaluated, and applied in assimilating first-time and returning to membership. Moreover, Nelson Searcy and Jennifer D. Henson argue that church congregations are not taught to serve guests with grace and hospitality.¹² GWC will intentionally treat their guests, members, and friends alike.

Church Attenders. Church attendees are synonymous with attendees or visitors. They are first-time and returning guests to the church. They represent a percentage of non-members in the congregation at any time. This action research aims to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to

¹¹ Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 1992), 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

transform attendees into committed members. This research study attempts to take guests from their initial visit to membership. The membership level is returning guests who take responsibility in the church and mature in the Christian faith. In his book called *Fusion*, Nelson Searcy calls attendee's guests.¹³ The term attendees is used in this research study for newcomers and visitors to the church. GWC has adopted Searcy's terminology and appropriately refers to visitors as guests.

Church Membership. Church membership is a means by which the church demarcates its boundaries by making a clear distinction between the world and God's holy people.¹⁴ Membership with the church necessitates a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, understood as being "born again." Membership represents the commitment between church members and the church to strive toward maturity in Christ. Membership is not a theological term in Scripture but is analogous to belonging. The privilege of membership is the opportunity to participate, lead, direct, and engage other systems in the church. Membership aims to produce followers of Jesus Christ who are committed to the church and Christian maturity.

Church Systems Approach. Church systems are interrelated and interdependent processes with predefined and prearranged steps that help believers mature in Christ. Harrison and Taylor wrote, "A basic tenet of systems theory is that a system is perfectly designed to get the results that it gets."¹⁵ Smriti Chand argued that a system approach is composed of a combination of

¹³ Nelson Searcy & Jennifer Dykes Henson, *Fusion: Turning First-time Guests into Fully Engaged Members* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 25.

¹⁴ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *How to Build A Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 75.

¹⁵ Jim Harrison, Trisha Taylor, *Leading Change: Congregational Transformation Fueled by Personal Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017), 119.

things that, when in interaction, form a complex whole.¹⁶ Church systems are biblically based, spiritually focused, and relationship-driven. These systems are implemented by church leadership and with the help of church volunteers. The church systems process is typically accomplished through assimilation methodology.

Discipleship. According to John K. Goodrich, “Discipleship is the process of being called by and conforming to Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ The discipleship methodology of GWC is to bring outsiders into saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and mature them in the faith through church systems. Disciples connect with other believers in small groups to learn the Scriptures, pray, share their faith, and serve God in volunteer ministry. Luke indicates that in the early church, the term "disciple" came to refer to the growing band of believers in Jesus (i.e., Acts 6:7; 9:26; 14:21-22; 11:26, NIV). A similar notion of an expanding circle of disciples is suggested by the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20, NIV), in which the risen Christ commanded His followers to "make disciples" of people from all national/ethnic groups.¹⁸

Evangelical. Evangelical is derived from the Greek word *evangelion*, meaning gospel or good news. Specifically, the term refers to a person, church, or organization committed to the Christian gospel message that Jesus Christ is the Savior of humanity.¹⁹ The term evangelical may capture broadly ecclesial organizations ranging from independent fundamental-conservative

¹⁶ Smriti Chand, “System Approach to Management: Definition, Features and Evaluation,” Accessed from <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/management/system-approach-to-management-definition-features-and-evaluation/27897>.

¹⁷ John K. Goodrich, *Following Jesus Christ: The New Testament Message of Discipleship for Today*, edited by Mark L. Strauss. Kregel Publications, (2019).

¹⁸ R. N. Longenecker, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 31.

¹⁹ Jonathan Merritt, “Defining Evangelical,” (December 2015): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/>.

groups to some Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. This research will use the term evangelicals as an alternative reference to the term Christians, Christianity, or the word church.

Newcomers. A newcomer is synonymous with first-time, returning, and regular guests to the church. Furthermore, newcomers are not members of the church.

Small Groups. Small groups are an intentional church strategy to connect people regularly for relationships and a common purpose. Small groups provide an environment for connection, community, and spiritual formation. The Gateway Church will create and design small groups to connect people for fellowship, discipleship, community, and mobilization for outreach and evangelism. Searcy believes that it is possible to have 100 percent of church participation in small groups.²⁰ Furthermore, he insists that small groups are biblical.²¹

Stewardship. Stewardship has a foundational meaning in its biblical roots. A good steward understood they were not the owners of assets entrusted to their care. A steward, also considered a manager, manages an owner's assets. Furthermore, biblical stewardship is a crucial spiritual principle taught in Scripture and modeled in discipleship. Ken Sloan writes, "Churches that are known for the generosity of their people are consistently ones that have a clear sense of their mission in their community and the world."²² Stewardship in this action research refers to systematic giving in the local church context. Stewardship participation can measure spiritual growth for new and growing Christians. GWC will include stewardship as a factor in maturing the church.

Volunteerism. Volunteers in the church drive ministries. They assist church leadership and oversee many of the church's systems. Nelson Searcy calls the volunteer system the ministry

²⁰ Nelson Searcy & Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 43.

²¹ Ibid, 16.

²² Ken Sloane, *Stewardship: Raising Up Generous Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016) 20.

system.²³ Volunteers are unique to the church; it is how the church grows disciples and mobilizes the church for significant ministry. In this research, volunteers represent unique people in the church that are involved in ministry. Furthermore, the use of volunteers in this research does not distinguish between church attendees and church members. However, regular guests are the minimum volunteer participation allowed for those connected with GWC. Moreover, the volunteer ministry system is essential because it encourages Christians to serve God with total devotion.²⁴

Weekend Service. The weekend service is the cooperative worship gathering of the church on Sundays. It follows what is called the Regulative Principle, which states that everything done in a corporate worship gathering must be warranted by Scripture.²⁵ Any reference to the weekend service in the research paper is a reference to the assembled church on Sunday. Searcy and Henson write, "Ultimately, your philosophy of worship will define, motivate, and serve as a measure for your worship services."²⁶ The weekend service at Gateway Church is God-honoring, Christ-focused, and sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit. The weekend service will be the best opportunity for assimilation when the church gathers.

Worldview. This study will address two types of worldviews: non-biblical and biblical. "Our worldview influences the way we approach decision-making."²⁷ Firstly, the non-biblical worldview believes that knowledge, meaning, and value in the human and natural world exist indiscriminately in the Bible. This view will be an inverted opposition to the church's teaching

²³ Searcy and Henson, *Connect*, 27.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *How to Build A Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2021), 95.

²⁶ Nelson Searcy & Jason Hatley, *Engage: A Guide to Creating Life-Transforming Worship Services* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2011), 27.

²⁷ Aimee Joseph, *Demystifying Decision-Making: A Practical Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2022), 225.

about humanity, God, and life. Secondly, a biblical worldview is a belief in the infallible Word of God.

This view holds that the Bible is entirely accurate and the foundation of everything said and done. The Gateway Church will use a biblical or Christian worldview in its ecclesiastical approach to discipleship. Furthermore, this view is the only one the church holds spiritually, doctrinally, and practically. This action research will use the biblical worldview to develop a church system approach to spiritual and numeric growth.

Limitations

This project aims to produce a model for turning first-time attendees into committed church members. Nevertheless, there will be some limitations. First, the thesis project will examine the church's current ministry paradigm to determine the proper church systems approach. Resources, time, and participants will restrict the exploration of other potential approaches to church systems advocated in the Church of Jesus Christ. Second, this project is limited by region and location. This research study can only be conducted by the researcher in the location of the problem that is geographically located to the researcher.

The findings in this research study will be verified and documented. However, the findings will not be presented as irrefutable facts. Third, the results from this thesis project will add to the number of church growth strategies without attempting to make this study the final authority on the subject. Fourth, the project takes place in a mid-size city with more per capita churches than any other Georgia city. The disproportionate number of churches in Columbus, Georgia, will limit the number of anticipated participants in this study.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the study, with the number of potential participants slowly returning to a live church service. Additionally, live stream and online church

services have increased in popularity and have become an alternative for seekers to check out a church before attending. This research study project is unique to GWC, and any solutions will be designed to address its problem. Therefore, potential solutions may not be universally applicable to another local church.

Nevertheless, biblical principles are universally applicable, although the methodology may not be. Finally, due to the ecclesiastical structure and contemporary setting of GWC, the applicability of the findings to other churches may be limited because of the size and ministry paradigm. Nevertheless, it does not exclude smaller and larger churches from modifying best practices to fit their ministry context. Therefore, this project will rely on biblical principles while using best practices from experts in the church growth field that apply to any ministry setting.

Delimitations

The researcher is imposing the following constraints on the research project to ensure that the research is conducted with complete ministry integrity. The highest quality of this research is contingent upon the following delimitations. First, the sample group for this study project will consist exclusively of first-time and returning guests to Gateway Church. Second, potential participants must be residents within a 30-minute driving distance of the church. Third, participants in this project cannot be active members of GWC or another church.

Fourth, this project will not endorse one philosophical ideology of ministry over another because the problem and ministry context may differ, undermining a given solution.

Fifth, only the board of directors, elders, and membership will be permitted to implement or oversee the process of assimilation during the study. Sixth, only membership of GWC will be authorized to help the researcher in this project. Seventh, the researcher will restrict participants' data to GWC members who have consented to participate in this action research study for the

stated purpose. This approach aims to retrieve the best possible data through the most effective method possible.

Thesis Statement

Christian maturity necessitates a process with strategic biblical principles of discipleship that cause new Christians to grow to maturity in the knowledge of God and Christ. Firstly, mature Christians are committed to the local church and its mission to reach the lost. Secondly, mature Christians understand the biblical significance of worship, Scripture, prayer, fellowship, serving, growth, generosity, and evangelism. Mature Christians use their spiritual gifts and natural abilities to volunteer inside and outside the church to advance the cause of Christ with love and compassion for the lost, hurting, and those living without hope in the world. Moreover, mature Christian's endeavor to walk in the Spirit and bear lasting spiritual fruit. God intends for the church to live a Spirit-filled life, serve as a living witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and glorify God with good works.

Mature Christians represent the health of a local church and drive its ministries. Healthy, growing churches develop strategic steps that take the church on a journey toward spiritual maturity. Membership in the church should represent the commitment to grow in Christ, walk in Christian love, and become an indispensable member to fulfill the church's mission. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready" (1 Cor 3:2, NIV).

The apostle Paul suggests a spiritual maturity process for the church that desires it and intentionally seeks it (1 Cor 3:2-3). Paul had a theoretical approach based on a theological understanding that Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith and that foundation must be carefully built upon to reach spiritual maturity. Therefore, the biblical methodology employed by

Paul built churches, established church leadership, advanced missions, and penetrated a pagan society with the gospel. If Gateway Church creates strategic steps with fundamental biblical praxis, then the church will help first-time and returning guests transition from attenders to committed church members.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This DMIN action research thesis explores and creates strategic steps that take first-time guests through a process from attendees to local church members. This presupposition is based on contemporary research that postulates that the implementation of strategic biblical steps that are clear, simple, and practical increases the probability that first-time guests would return and participate in the life of the church at their level of comfort, growth, and spiritual maturity. Churches using the power of assimilation as a ministry delivery system become healthy with spiritual and numerical growth.

Literature Review

Healthy churches experience both numerical and spiritual growth because of intentionality from leadership, cooperation with the Holy Spirit, and a predetermined and predefined structure that integrates it all. Jeff Iorg believes that significant changes in ministry happen with intentional structure. He wrote, "To build healthy congregational systems, we have to create healthy structures."¹ For example, organisms in the human body work seamlessly with up to twelve different systems. These systems work in harmony and cooperation to create good health. If even one system in the human body malfunctions, it can seriously disrupt the function of the other systems, leading to poor overall health.

¹ Jeff Iorg, *Leading Major Change in Your Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2018), 119.

Likewise, healthy congregational systems are intentional, strategic, and based on biblical principles to take newcomers in the church on a journey from knowing Christ to growing in Christ resulting from a healthy church system. If even one congregational system is dysfunctional, the journey from knowing Christ to growing in Christ becomes complicated, and the probability of reaching spiritual maturity is unclear.

Healthy church systems aid leadership in implementing the vision and fulfilling the purposes of the church. Gary McIntosh and Phil Stevenson are recognized church growth experts across denominational church lines. They believe, "If a church has a problem with giving, volunteering, outreach, or a host of other issues, it has a vision problem."² Their insight and experience in church revitalization are instrumental in helping church leaders navigate the sometimes-painful journey to turn around dying churches.

The church can only reproduce after its kind. Mark Sayers wrote, "Vision without systems thinking ends up painting lovely pictures of the future with no deep understanding of the forces that must be mastered to move from here to there."³ Therefore, leadership needs a clear vision, clarity about what they value, and structure to move the church forward. Most importantly, the Great Commission must be a non-negotiable purpose of their existence (Matt 28:18). Furthermore, every church has a structure, even if its structure is not predetermined or prearranged. Additionally, the structure of a given church determines its ministry impact. In this action research, systems are synonymous with structure.

A church can have numerous healthy systems that lead to growth. However, the six fundamental systems in the church are crucial to taking first-time guests through a process from

² McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 177.

³ Mark Sayers, *Reappearing Church: The Hope for Renewal in the Rise of Our Post-Christian Culture* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019), 34.

attendees to committed members. These systems exist to retain newcomers to the church and prevent members from "falling through the preverbal cracks" and dropping out of church.

Nevertheless, no system is more crucial in the church than assimilation because it links the rest of the systems together. Each system works inextricably and harmoniously to achieve sustained growth. For example, evangelism and leadership are vital for church growth. Additionally, the steps from attendees to engaged church members are intentional steps with biblical praxis in six critical systems that complement evangelism and leadership. This action research will integrate these systems to create a strategy with biblical principles that makes a first-time guest a returning guest and a returning guest a committed church member.

The six systems widely recognized by scholarship that put new people to the church on the path to spiritual maturity are the weekend service, biblical hospitality, assimilation, small groups, volunteer ministry, and stewardship. These systems will produce specific results in the church and support other systems, and healthy church systems designed to help newcomers belong and transform lead to spiritual and numerical growth. Additionally, each system is measured through the lens of Scripture and evaluated as deliberate steps necessary to take attendees to church members.

Weekend Church Service

Many churches today are establishing a more substantial digital footprint to stream their services across multiple platforms, and they are built on the framework of the weekend service. Rendel and Parks, authors of *Intentional Church*, insist that the weekend worship service is the starting point for many on their spiritual journey.⁴ The early church was admonished not to give

⁴ Bart Rendel and Doug Parks, *Intentional Church: How to Implement an Operation System Clarifies Vision, Improves Decision Making, and Stimulates Growth* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 202), 105.

up on meeting together, as some of them were in the habit of doing so (Heb 10:25). It provided the best opportunity for the spiritual growth and maturity of the saints. Therefore, the weekend service is the starting point for turning attendees into church members. Additionally, the weekend worship service is structured for the growth and maturity of the saints.

The weekend service system plans, implements and evaluates essential ministries when the church gathers. The music, preaching, and offering are essential matrices constantly evaluated in healthy churches and progressively improved over time. This system assures leadership that weekend services will go as planned and people will have the best possible opportunity to have a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit and respond to a presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Leadership evaluates this system more often because the Holy Spirit works in these moments to bring about salvation and transformation. Jared Wilson insists that God gets the glory with a powerful proclamation in Christ-centered worship, which should be the focus of the Sunday gathering. He wrote, "If you treat the worship gathering as an experiential production... the church begins to see itself as concertgoers or, again, as customers rather than as the body of Christ".⁵ In addition, even in the attraction model church, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the most essential mark in the weekend service.

Jared Wilson believes the best preaching contains both proclamation and application. He insists that Christ-centered expository preaching is best for Sunday morning church gatherings.⁶ Mark Dever argues that expositional preaching is the first mark of a healthy church. He wrote,

⁵ Jared C. Wilson, *The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto against the Status Quo* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

"If you get this one right, all others should follow."⁷ He admits it is not the only mark but far more critical than the others.

Mark Clifton believes, "As followers of Jesus, we are called to live worthy of God's glory."⁸ The purpose of gathering the church on Sundays is fundamental to its existence. Therefore, the primary focus of the weekend service should be to glorify God rather than any other activity having an equal focus. Therefore, carefully selected songs should accommodate the direction of the message and entreat the Holy Spirit to lead God's people into the heart of worship that brings glory to God.

Dever and Alexander wrote, "The regulative principle states that everything we do in a corporate worship gathering must be warranted by scripture."⁹ They insist this can take place in the form of explicit biblical commands or implicit of a biblical text.¹⁰ The weekend system aims to fulfill the Scripture mandate of the church that includes inclusivity of the unchurched among them. Healthy growing churches welcome non-Christians and include them in the worship experience as much as possible while anticipating their response to the gospel message.

Biblical Hospitality

Andrew David Naselli, the author of *Romans*, states that hospitality translates *Philoxenia*, a compound word with the etymology, love of strangers.¹¹ He insists that hospitality refers not only to entertaining guests or visitors. He argues that it includes strangers, especially Christians

⁷ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2021), 44.

⁸ Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2016), 15.

⁹ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *How to Build a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2021), 95.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2020), 161.

who could not afford lodging in ancient hotels.¹² The practice of hospitality and to be hospitable was very important among believers in Paul's day.¹³ In Romans 12:13, Paul exhorted the church to practice hospitality. For example, it was one of the requirements to exercise leadership in the church (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8, NIV).

Hospitality signifies a readiness that should mark everyone in the church.¹⁴ "Based on Jesus's teachings in Matthew 25 and Luke 14, a normative understanding of Christian hospitality emerged in the writings of the church fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries."¹⁵ They argued that Christian hospitality was to be different from conventional hospitality by being open-handed, focused on those in need who could not repay, and good for both hosts and guests because God was present in the practice.¹⁶ Furthermore, Peter H Davids, the author of *The First Epistle of Peter*, writes, "Peter does not simply call for hospitality, but for it to be offered ungrudgingly" (1 PE: 4:9, NIV).¹⁷ He states that the term ungrudgingly means without grumbling or complaining.¹⁸

¹² Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2020), 161.

¹³ Colin G. Kruse *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4859870>. Created from liberty on 2023-12-14 03:30:02.

¹⁴ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=6454404>. Created from liberty on 2023-12-14 03:57:30.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ W. Elwell, C.D. Pohl, *Hospitality: Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Baker Publishing (2017) Group. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGjlbGU6NTc2ODc4?aid=96753>

¹⁷ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter: The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 159.

¹⁸ Ibid, 159.

Biblical hospitality is analogous to customer service in secular industries. Theodore Kinni, the author of *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*, argues that having excellent customer service comes from building a welcoming environment with people in mind. He wrote, "You don't build it for yourself. You know what people want, and you build it for them."¹⁹ A church may only get one chance to make a critical first impression. Therefore, biblical hospitality helps them put their "best foot forward."

A welcoming environment is a prerequisite for the implementation of an effective system. Guestology, a phrase coined by Walt Disney, means the art and science of knowing and understanding customers.²⁰ Disney believed that guestology enabled the organization to provide a context for its service strategies. In the same way, GWC believes that hospitality provides the context for their ministry strategies. Walt Disney called this guestology, which to them means the science of knowing and understanding guests.²¹ In the same way, the goal of biblical hospitality is to make guests feel at home in church.

Thriving churches meet the preconceived notion of what a church should be and exceed them. A welcoming church can quickly dispel many stereotypes that church attendees have. Disney's businesses generated over \$38 billion in annual revenue and \$7.6 billion in operating income in 2010.²² Their customer service model is built around the premise, "Get a good idea and stay with it, and work at it until it's done right."²³ Thom S. Rainer, a writer and researcher who has written extensively about internal structures in the church, argues that regardless of the

¹⁹ Theodore Kinni, *BE Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* (New York, NY: Disney Editions, 2011), 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 165.

size of a church, several people are needed to carry out the welcoming ministry well for assimilation to work.²⁴

The treatment of first-time and returning guests is essential to assimilation. If guests do not feel welcome, they are unlikely to return. Therefore, biblical hospitality and assimilation must be an ongoing church ethos process. It must, therefore, be intentional and relationship-driven. Johnathan Gainsbrugh, author of *Winning the Backdoor War*, insists that "Hospitality Mentality is something every church needs not only to have, but to constantly work on improving."²⁵ In an effort to compensate for depersonalization in today's culture, people must experience a much more welcoming atmosphere when attending church. The success of the Walt Disney Company is due primarily to their mastery of the treatment of guests.

The Power of Assimilation

Assimilation is a process of integrating people with God and the local church. Webster's dictionary defines it as "the act of bringing or coming into resemblance."²⁶ Assimilation, unlike evangelism, is an ongoing process, not an event. A builder must lay the foundation before constructing a house. In the same way, Jesus Christ is the church's foundation, and assimilation builds on that foundation by integrating people with God and the church. Assimilation helps transform God's people into a mystical, spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5).

McIntosh and Stevenson wrote, "Any approach to reach, teach, or serve others must eventually be developed into an organized structure."²⁷ Assimilation addresses the metaphor of

²⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church* (Nashville, TN: B &H Publishing, 2018), 90.

²⁵ Gainsbrugh, Jonathan, *Winning the Backdoor War* (Placerville, CA: Gainsbrugh Resource Ministries, 1993), 90.

²⁶ Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Publisher, 2022).

²⁷ McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 175.

the backdoor to the church. Guests come in through the church's front door and leave through the back door because of the lack of assimilation. Backdoor loss is a significant problem in virtually all denominations and congregations.

Joel D. Heck argues, "If churches are truly interested in making disciples, they will be concerned about what happens to the new converts, the transfers, the dropouts, and the young confirmands."²⁸ According to the Barna Group, an evangelical Christian polling firm, 80 percent of churches in America have plateaued or are in decline. "In actual numbers, 36 percent fewer Americans attended church weekly in 2020 than in 1993."²⁹

This research shows an alarming decline in the trend of Christians who pray, attend church, and read their Bible over the last decade. This research shows that Christians who consistently maintained these spiritual practices remained steady. Polling from the Barna Group shows that Christians with marginal attachments to their faith are disengaging from the church. Committed Christians with developed spiritual disciplines appear to be unmovable.³⁰

Additionally, churches with a welcoming environment and practical prevention of backdoor loss through front-door care contribute to their health and growth rate. Assimilation helps to minimize both inactivity on the part of new members and the walking out of the backdoor of regular guests to the church. Heck insists that people are assimilated when they are helped to acquire similar knowledge about Christian beliefs and similar attitudes toward Christ and His church. Additionally, they assimilated with similar feelings of belonging and similar patterns of behavior.³¹

²⁸ Joel, D. Heck, *New Member Assimilation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 9.

²⁹ David Kinnaman, *State of the Church*, Group, <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church> (Barna Group, 2020).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Heck, *New Member Assimilation*, 12.

Small-Groups

The initial growth of the early church was rapid and without the typical structure to facilitate discipleship expected today. Instead, they gathered in small groups to meet in the temple court and from house to house. Sayers wrote, "In scripture, God chooses to work with small groups-Noah and family, Abraham and Sarah, and Israel among the nations."³² Small groups are a strategic way for the church to gather, pray, serve, fellowship, and evangelize. In addition, a robust small group system can help mentor emerging leaders, recruit volunteers, start new ministries, and train hospitality and first responder teams.

A tech company named Alphabet, also known as Google, wanted to find out what makes a good team. According to Jonathan Pokluda, lead pastor of Harris Creek Baptist Church, their results confirmed what is found in Scripture.

Pokluda wrote, "Here was Google's number one takeaway about healthy teams: specific personality types, skills, or backgrounds did not make any difference. What distinguished the good teams from the dysfunctional ones was how teammates treated one another."³³ Jesus said that the world would know His disciples if they loved one another (John 13:35). Love and respect are fundamental to intimacy in a small group.

Successful small groups in the church are intentional about how group members are treated. Positive shared experiences among group members create a sense of belonging. Searcy and Thomas wrote that taking care of those inside the church first is conventional wisdom. The reality is that small groups that focus on serving their members rather than on reaching out to

³² Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 164.

³³ Jonathan Pokluda, *Welcoming the Future Church: How to Reach, Teach, and Engage Young Adults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 25.

others quickly become inwardly focused and stagnant.³⁴ Pokluda said, “Shared experiences have the ability to fuse people together, often even those who would not have made sense together outside of that context.”³⁵

Luke gives the church the historical account of what happened on the Day of Pentecost after the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:44-47. Peter preached a Christ-centered message that resulted in three thousand people being added to the church. The church used small groups to accommodate the sudden growth and need for the church to make disciples. This approach proved successful because “the Lord added daily to their numbers of those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, NIV). Small-group systems have a proven strategy to lead life change in the church. In short, small groups change lives.

For example, Jesus and the twelve disciples constituted a small group ministry. He took twelve unlearned fishermen and transformed them into fishers of men. Additionally, thriving small group systems can be planned and executed to cast vision, energize people, and articulate the purpose of the church. Hartwig, Davis, and Sniff wrote that small groups are potent entities in the church that can be used to align the church's mission and values.³⁶ They argue that small group systems can become an effective evangelistic tool to reach those on the fringe.

Searcy and Thomas wrote, “Newcomers are good for groups, and groups are good for newcomers.”³⁷ New people will have a contagious, fresh excitement, and because they do not have to be Christians to participate, it gives them the perfect opportunity to belong and believe.³⁸

³⁴ Searcy, Nelson, Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entire New Approach to Small Groups* (Ventura, CA: Regal Publishing, 2008), 10.

³⁵ Jonathan Pokluda, *Welcoming the Future Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 25.

³⁶ Ryan T. Hartwig, Courtney W. Davis, Jason A. Sniff. *Leading Small Groups That Thrives: Five Shifts to Take Your Group to the Next Level* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 52.

³⁷ Searcy and Thomas, *Activate*, 178.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Small group systems effectively assimilate returning guests into the church and facilitate the journey from attender to member.

Volunteer Ministry

The church is a unique organization that is run mainly by volunteers. Therefore, the church needs an effective volunteer system. It exists to mobilize people to serve others and drive the church's ministries. When people mobilize for ministry, the impact can transform a church, community, and city for Jesus Christ. So then, a volunteer system mobilizes people to fulfill the missional purposes of the church. If the church fails to connect people in significant ministry, they are robbed of the opportunity to grow.³⁹

Therefore, small groups are a vehicle that can reproduce a sense of belonging for Christians in the church of Jesus Christ. Small groups accommodate leadership in three ways: they provide a venue for recruiting volunteers for ministry; they provide a structure to recruit and train emerging leaders in the church; they are the ideal environment for maturing believers in the faith through prayer, devotion, fellowship, and doctrinal exposition.

Initially, GWC will launch strategic life groups at the beginning of this research project to evaluate its effect on guest retention. Small groups will be a vital part of the assimilation process. The church believes there is a high chance that new and returning guests will drop out if they do not make a significant relationship connection. Therefore, the church will offer returning guests the opportunity to participate in life groups and volunteer ministry at an entry-level engagement. Bob Franquiz, the author of the book *Pull: Making your church magnetic*, wrote that most people who drop out of church usually drop out altogether.⁴⁰ Franquiz wrote, “We

³⁹ Searcy and Henson, *Connect*, 21.

⁴⁰ Bob Franquiz, *Pull: Making Your Church Magnetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2013), 79.

don't do anyone a service by leading them to Christ and then leaving them alone to figure out how to grow in the Lord."⁴¹

For example, the ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit are active each week when Christians serve in vital areas of volunteer ministry. The corporate body of Christ exists to serve the head, which is Christ. In addition, a volunteer system can strategically engage returning guests to the church in relationship building and help them put their feet to their faith.

For example, all newcomers to the church will not be ready to belong or believe fully. Nevertheless, they feel drawn by the Holy Spirit to the church. Volunteer ministry serves as an onramp to help them belong before they believe. When newcomers volunteer for outreach, it becomes evangelistic and impactful toward their spiritual transformation. Therefore, volunteerism is vital and essential in reaching newcomers to the church.

Jesus said, "A servant is not greater than his master" (Matt 20:28, NIV). He came to serve and offer His life as a ransom for many. In the same way, growing churches regularly engage congregants with opportunities to wear a towel as a servant of the Lord. Volunteer ministry is one of the ways disciples grow and mature in faith. Without a strategic volunteer system, the church fails to be methodical and impactful in reaching its community and city for Jesus. Volunteer ministry creates opportunities to raise new leadership in the church. Searcy and Henson believe, "The ministry system is an ongoing system that motivates people to serve for the first time and mobilizes them for a lifetime of serving."⁴²

Woodward and White argue in favor of using biblical terms for offices in the church instead of contemporary ones. They insist that this approach will increase volunteerism in the church. They wrote, "We ought to eliminate words like volunteers and use biblical words to

⁴¹ Ibid, 80.

⁴² Searcy and Henson, *Connect*, 35.

describe the people of God.”⁴³ They argue that the way to recapture and motivate the entire body of Christ to live out their calling is by using biblical terminology to describe them and their ministry.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Woodward and White agree that a missional-minded church will speak the language of significant ministry impact through volunteers. Denver and Alexander take a more cautious approach to non-members serving in the church.

They insist on a structure of assimilation that ensures volunteers understand the beliefs and values of the church before they are asked to serve. Their concerns are about the teaching people may have received from their previous church.⁴⁵ They are not against volunteers serving in vital ministries of the church. However, they prefer a track- record of faithfulness beforehand.

Stewardship System

An effective stewardship system creates a culture of generosity. The free will offerings of the saints fuel the mission of the church. Giving in the church is not automatic; givers are developed through a stewardship system. An effective system removes unnecessary barriers to giving by providing numerous ways to give fast, easily, and safely. It challenges people to give intentionally and proportionately of their income. An efficient stewardship system helps people become generous like Jesus, “though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9, NIV).

This system teaches biblical principles on giving; then, it provides a variety of ways and opportunities for the church to give. The importance of giving ranks among key disciplines like prayer, Bible reading, and church gatherings. Jesus did not underestimate the importance of

⁴³ JR Woodward & Dan White Jr. *The Church as Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 159.

⁴⁴ Woodward and White Jr. *The Church as Movement*, 159.

⁴⁵ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build A Healthy Church*, 80.

money in people's lives when he warned, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matt 6:24, NIV). McIntosh and Stevenson argue that Jesus essentially asked the question: What do you value most? In other words, where is your treasure?⁴⁶

Searcy developed a stewardship system he calls Maximize. He states that "Maximize is the stewardship system that was developed out of this singular goal: To cultivate first-time givers and move them toward extravagant giving."⁴⁷ Churches cannot fully develop disciples without developing strong givers, and the stewardship system accomplishes it. Additionally, teaching the importance of stewardship to returning guests to the church prepares them for membership.

The prerequisite for membership ought to be responsibility. The bulk of the ongoing financial support of the church comes from its members. Stewardship systems that teach and model generosity and essential biblical steps lead growing Christians to mature in understanding giving as one of God's purposes for the church. The principle of tithing is one primary method of teaching proportionate giving in the church.

The principle is considered the obedient level of giving by many churches that teach tithing. Ken Sloane writes, "While tithing is generally stated as the goal or standard of giving by many churches and denominations, tithing is seldom confused with generosity."⁴⁸ Generosity in the church is not instantaneous; it is a process.

The principle of tithing is the exception and not the rule for giving since the time of the early church.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is the goal of many denominational churches for mature

⁴⁶ McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 83.

⁴⁷ Nelson Searcy & Jennifer Dykes Henson, *Maximize: How to Develop Extravagant Givers In Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2010), 43.

⁴⁸ Ken Sloane, *Stewardship: Raising Generous Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 27.

Christians. James Petty believes a crucial way the church should strive toward generosity is to teach them to embrace Christian beliefs.⁵⁰ Giving is well-known as an integral part of Christian maturity and the driving force behind missions and outreach ministries in the body of Christ.

Theological Foundations

The church of Jesus Christ is the dwelling place for God's Holy Spirit and is built squarely on the foundation of Scripture. The foundation of a healthy church has doctrinal truth as the driving force. The need for deliberate leadership and concrete guidance that represents simple biblical principles cannot be overstated in an area where the attractional model for the church's gathering has grown in popularity. Therefore, several Scripture passages are used for a more global view of the theological foundation for this action research project to develop and initiate a strategy with biblical steps to help attendees become committed church members.

The Church Gathers

The meaning of the term "church" is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. First, the Greek term, which means called out, was commonly used to indicate an assembly of citizens of a Greek city and is so used in Acts 19:32, 39. The citizens who were quite conscious of their privileged status over slaves and noncitizens were called to the assembly by a herald and dealt in their meetings democratically with matters of common concern. When the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a church, no doubt exists that they perceived themselves as called out by God in Jesus Christ for a particular purpose and that their status was privileged in Jesus Christ.⁵¹

⁵⁰ James C. Petty, *Acts Of Grace: The Power of Generosity to Change your Life, the Church, and the World* (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 2019), 34.

⁵¹ Trent C. Butler, *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991).

Paul wrote, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:19, NIV). Jesus Christ calls the church to preach the gospel and make disciples. Therefore, the church is a faith community that welcomes attendees with biblical hospitality to hear the gospel. Paul wrote in Galatians, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:9-10, NIV).

Searcy insists that the church is truly a family expecting guests, and they should be ready to show them intentional hospitality when they arrive.⁵² Consequently, intentional hospitality is vital to assimilating attendees into the church.

The Church Gathers for Worship

Worship is a significant sign of a church's fitness. The respected researcher Kirk Hardaway explains that worship in growing churches, especially in rapidly growing churches, differs from worship in plateaued and declining churches. According to Hardaway, the difference is the level of excitement, celebration, electricity, and spirit of revival. He insists that the worship experience in these churches sets them apart.⁵³ Additionally, Greear wrote in his book *Gaining by Losing*, “It is not through our success that God saves the world, but through our sacrifice. He

⁵² Nelson Searcy, *Fusion*, 40.

⁵³ C. Kirk Hardaway, *Church Growth Principles: Separating Fact and Fiction* (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board, 1991), 62.

calls us first to an altar, not a platform.”⁵⁴ Therefore, the weekend service system is critical to successful assimilation and discipleship at GWC.

Most importantly, the purpose of the church is the worship of God. God has revealed Himself as the eternally self-existent, I Am, the Creator of heaven and earth and the Redeemer of mankind. Additionally, He has revealed Himself as embodying the principles of relationship and association as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.⁵⁵ Moses wrote, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4, NIV).

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah when he said, “You are my witnesses, ‘declares the Lord,’ and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me” (Isa 43:10, NIV). Luke wrote, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21-22, NIV). Christians are called to live worthy of God's glory.⁵⁶ Jesus said in John 4:24, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” Therefore, church attendees should hear a presentation of the gospel and be saved upon their confession of faith.

⁵⁴ J.D. Greear, *Gain by Losing: Why the future belongs to churches that send* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 22.

⁵⁵ William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton, *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1993), 42.

⁵⁶ Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2016), 15.

The Church Makes Disciples

There are several variations of the definition of a disciple. The literal meaning ranges from a student, a follower, a learner, and someone who models the teaching of others. A Christian disciple is fundamentally a follower and a student and adheres to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The term "Christian" finds its roots in a follower or disciple of Jesus Christ. Acts 11:26 says that it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

The church seeks to implement a congregational system that fulfills the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 because it is called to make disciples as their scriptural focus. Therefore, a congregational system must be theologically based and strategically designed for practicality. In this instance, assimilation plays an important role.

Bob Franquiz argues in his book, *The Proclamation of the Gospel*, that developing an assimilation system is the quickest way to see sustained growth in the church.⁵⁷ Assimilation is an ongoing process in the church. Proverbs 27:22-23 reads, "Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds." In addition, shepherds knew the face of their sheep and called them by name. Likewise, pastors of Christ's flock should "look well" to them in person and not discharge their duty.⁵⁸

A central scriptural theme that relates directly to assimilation is God as the Great Shepherd and Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In Psalm 23, David wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd" (Ps 23:1-6, NIV). Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11-12, NIV). Peter appealed to the elders in 1 Peter 5:2-3 to be shepherds of God's flock under their care, serving as overseers, not because they must, but

⁵⁷ Franquiz, *Pull*, 79.

⁵⁸ Robert Jamieson, Andrew Robert Fausset, and David Brown, *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, Accessed October 9, 2022, Biblesoft, Inc.

because they were willing. Additionally, the elders were not to be greedy for money but eager to serve those entrusted to their care.

The Church Gathers for Preaching and Teaching

The New Testament church began on the Day of Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit and a Christ-centered sermon from the apostle Peter. The Apostle Paul wrote, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom 10:9-11, NIV).

Those who responded to Peter's preaching were baptized. About three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41, NIV). Acts 2:42-43 reveals four practical principles that are relevant for the church to take newcomers on the journey from attender to member: (1) Teaching, (2) Fellowship, (3) The Breaking of Bread, (4) and Prayer. Its relevance for the church today is predicated on the statement made by Luke in Acts 2:42. He wrote, "And they continued steadfastly" (Acts 2:42, NIV). First, he wrote, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42, NIV). Keener wrote, "Expressions of community life include the apostles' teaching, probably based especially on what they learned from Jesus and from Scripture."⁵⁹ Additionally, the apostles probably taught primarily at large gatherings in the temple, and some teaching may have also occurred during shared meals in homes. David N. Freedman writes, "The apostles' teaching refers to sound teaching as opposed to false teaching."⁶⁰ Therefore, the primitive church devoted itself to the apostles' doctrine.

⁵⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 460.

⁶⁰ David Noel Freedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000).

Two primary passages of the Scripture serve to lay the firm theological foundation of this research: Acts 2:42-47 and Hebrews 10:25. Both passages of Scripture form a basis to develop steps with biblical principles that take church attenders on the journey from knowing Christ, growing in Christ, to church membership.

Large crowds could gather for the apostles' teaching and prayer in the temple courts; this one temple to the true God probably provided the only suitable urban venue for a megachurch in the ancient Mediterranean world.⁶¹ Even here, however, these large meetings were supplemented by more familiar settings resembling small groups or house churches, perhaps chosen organically by neighborhoods. It would have been preferable to find homes large enough to gather several families for meals.

Luke wrote in Acts 11:25-26, "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught a great number of people" (NIV). Healthy, growing churches allow the people of God to hear His Word and are encouraged to apply it. This is consistent with the teaching of James 1:22, where the church is told, "Do not merely listen to the word," do what it says.

The Church Gathers for Fellowship

The early church devoted itself to fellowship. The word fellowship is the Greek word *koinonia*, which means sharing things with others.⁶² The presence of *koinonia* indicates a distinctive kind of fellowship. *Koinonia* was Paul's favorite word to describe a believer's relationship with the risen Lord and the benefits of salvation that come through Him.⁶³

⁶¹ Keener, *Acts*, 480.

⁶² Trent C. Butler, *Holman Bible Dictionary*, (2014) Accessed on November 14, 2023, Nashville, TN: PC Study Bible formatted electronic database by Biblesoft, Inc.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

The tendency of many Christians to refer to the Lord's Supper as, communion, is rooted in Paul's use of the term *koinonia* in the context of his descriptions of the Lord's Supper.⁶⁴ The Apostle Paul wrote, "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Rom 12:13, NIV).

Paul wrote, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited" (Rom 12:15-16, NIV). Calvin insists, "The Apostle employs words in Greek more significant, and more suitable to the antithesis, 'Not thinking,' he says, 'of high things:' by which he means, that it is not the part of a Christian to ambitiously aspire to those things by which he may excel others, nor to assume a lofty appearance, but on the contrary to exercise humility and meekness."⁶⁵ Calvin believed that nothing tends to break fellowship faster than to aspire to rise higher at the expense of others.

Therefore, healthy growing churches create a welcoming environment for guests and members alike. As a result, guests are more likely to return to churches where they feel loved, needed, and wanted. In addition, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42, NIV). Luke wrote that the first church broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:46). Joseph A. Alexander noted the order of these spiritual disciplines when he wrote, "They continued, first, in the apostles' doctrine; then, in communion, not with them alone, but with the body of believers."⁶⁶ Many Christians assume that this refers to "taking communion" and have an image of the early believers meeting in homes (v. 46) to eat a tiny

⁶⁴ Trent C. Butler, *Holman Bible Dictionary*, (2014) Accessed on November 14, 2023, Nashville, TN: PC Study Bible formatted electronic database by Biblesoft, Inc.

⁶⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary*, (2006) Accessed on October 9, 2022 PC Study Bible formatted electronic database by Biblesoft, Inc.

⁶⁶ Joseph Addison Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles Explained*, 2015: Accessed on June 25, 2022, Biblesoft Formatted Electronic Database.

wafer of bread and drink a symbolic amount of wine or grape juice, just as Christians do today in their churches. The context is not twentieth-century Christianity but first-century Judaism, and for Jews then as now, fellowship was mediated by meals.⁶⁷ The Fellowship of Acts 2:42 probably means the common life or community, including shared meals and breaking bread.⁶⁸

George Barna insists that unless church attendees become involved with others in their activities, they will never truly feel satisfied with the church.⁶⁹ Jesus told this parable in Luke: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it" (Luke 5:3-7, NIV). The parable is an example of a diligent shepherd who knew the state of his flock. He did not assume that because there had been 100 sheep before, there would be 100 sheep later. Jesus commends the shepherd for his diligence. Sustained church growth is predicated on leadership's ability to close the backdoor, leading to unwanted dropouts.

The Church Gathers for Prayer

Luke indicates that prayer was a regular and vital part of their Christian fellowship (Luke 11:1-4). Prayer in this passage refers to public and private prayers, and it shows their devotion to the Lord and how He taught His apostles to pray. Paul wrote, "Pray continually" (1 Thess 5:17, NIV). Prayers abound in the Bible. From the time of Seth, "men began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26, NIV) to the culmination of history in Revelation, the people of God pray. The Bible contains nearly fifty lengthy prayers recorded in prose sections and several hundred shorter

⁶⁷ David H. Stern. *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 1992: Accessed on September 24, 2022, Jewish New Testament Publication, Inc. Biblesoft Formatted Electronic Database.

⁶⁸ David Noel Freedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000).

⁶⁹ McIntosh and Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them*, 93.

prayers or references to praying.⁷⁰ Genesis records Abraham's prayer: "Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked...?" (Gen 18:23-25, NIV).

David prayed, "Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me; O Lord, be my help. You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever" (Ps 30:10-12, NIV). Jesus models the intimate nature of prayer as conversation. He related to God as a "Father," using the Aramaic "Abba" as an intimate term for "Father."⁷¹ Luke 11:1-4 reads, "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.' So he said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'

Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman wrote, "Prayer is an exchange of confidence: we assume the stance of a trusting child and pray with faith and obedience; God remembers our frailty, loves us as his children, and hears and answers our prayers."⁷² The four principles outlined by Luke created a sense of awe among believers, and the apostles did many signs and wonders (Acts 2:43). Timothy Keller wrote, "The power of the Holy Spirit descended on early Christians in

⁷⁰ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Bible Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

response to powerful prayer.”⁷³ Keller insists that if Christians give priority to their outward life, their inward life will become dark and scary.⁷⁴

The church that teaches and models these principles is a healthy, growing church relative to its community. Therefore, helping Christians reach spiritual maturity dictates that the church regularly assembles for Scripture reading. Luke also observes, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47, NIV). Therefore, creating the next steps that consist of the biblical principles previously outlined should help GWC address the problem of needing a theoretical system to guide guests, from attendees to members, through the process.

The premise of this research is that the local church must have strategic biblical steps to help people seeking Christ and find Christian fellowship. Early Christian fellowship, in some ways, was distinct from modern Western Christian fellowship with intimate worship, sharing, and learning of the Scriptures. They exercised those spiritual disciplines day-to-day and not a once-a-week routine.⁷⁵ Their devotion to the apostles' teaching meant that Christians listened to whatever they taught and applied what they heard. Colbert believes that many of the principles of prayer and faith were lost because the disciples were not as attentive to Jesus' prayer habits.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, they maintained visible unity among themselves. Not only were they united by a common purpose, but they also met together for fellowship in one place.⁷⁷ Meeting together in one place was not necessarily in one building all at once since a chamber commodious enough

⁷³ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2016), 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

⁷⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: "New Testament"* (Mishawaka, IN: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1989).

⁷⁶ Mary Colbert, *Prayer That Changes Things: 5 Principles to Activate Your Faith* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2020), 66.

⁷⁷ Thomas Whitelaw, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2014: Accessed on June 25, 2022, Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary. Biblesoft Formatted Electronic Database.

might be difficult to find in Jerusalem but in separate groups in different rooms. The essential thing about their meetings was that a spirit of concord and unity characterized them.⁷⁸ Therefore, GWC will create small groups for fellowship, mobilization, outreach, and evangelistic activities. The church recognizes the cultural differences between first-century churches and modern churches. Nevertheless, clear principles emerge that transcend time and culture that are applicable today.

Additionally, a theological and exegetical understanding of Hebrews 10:21-25 shows that early Christians were encouraged to draw nearer to God, keep their confession of faith, and hold on to hope. Furthermore, the writer regarded the desertion of the communal meetings as a serious matter.⁷⁹ The church was warned against not meeting regularly and supporting the Christian community because it could risk isolation, sin, and the danger of losing faith.⁸⁰ The text emphasizes not what a believer gets from the assembly but what they bring to the assembly.⁸¹ From an exegesis of the text, the early church rejected the notion of consumerism and admonished each other to inspire one another toward good works and deeds in Christ.

Regular church attendance for early Christians was essential for the reasons Paul indicated in Romans 2:2, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing, and perfect will" (NIV). Growing in the knowledge of God and

⁷⁸ Whitelaw, *Acts of the Apostles*.

⁷⁹ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Epistles to the Hebrews, 2014*, Accessed on November 14, 2023, (New York, NY: MacMillian Company), Biblesoft Formatted Electronic Database.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Christ is affirmed by Scripture. Nevertheless, many Christians in the early church and today neglect meeting regularly and believe such principles are unnecessary.⁸²

The virtual church is popular today due to the recent pandemic. It is advertised and promoted as an alternative to the church gathering. There is no theological precedent for a virtual church as the alternative to assembling. Nevertheless, virtual church or livestreaming is an available and widely used option instead of attending church. As such, it is a welcomed option for those unable to gather at the church.

Furthermore, a misunderstanding of the significance of why they gathered led many in the early church to forsake assembling one another. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding or underestimation of the significance of the church gathering has weakened its ability to transform communities and cities with the gospel. Christians can be creative and innovative with spiritual fervency in serving each other, especially by stirring each other toward a more vigorous and abundant exercise of love and the practice of good works.⁸³

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3: 12-13, "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light" (NIV). The apostle Paul implies that theoretical activity must rest on a theological foundation, and that foundation is Christ. According to Paul, this activity must be intentional and biblical because the quality of each person's work will be tested.

All this can be applied to the lives of all believers. The materials out of which believers' lives are constructed may seem at first sight to be infinite in number, yet there are only two great kinds. These are the right and the wrong, those that are in accordance with God's will and those

⁸² David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, September 1992: Accessed on June 25, 2022 PC Study Bible formatted electronic database, 78 Manahat, 96901 Jerusalem, Israel Rosh-Hashanah 5753.

⁸³ Goodspeed, *Epistles to the Hebrews*.

that are opposed to it; those that are prompted by the Holy Spirit and those that are prompted by carnal hearts.⁸⁴ Additionally, Paul indicates that spiritual maturity is an intentional process.

The apostle Paul recognized the spiritual immaturity of some Christians in Corinth and acted accordingly. "I gave you milk, not solid food" (1 Cor 3:2, NIV). Milk here undoubtedly refers to the simpler, more elementary doctrines of Christianity, such as the new birth, repentance, faith, and the like, which Paul had taught these Corinthians when he first ministered among them.⁸⁵ Eventually, babies are weaned off milk for solid food to the vital nutrients their bodies need to grow and mature. In the same way, the church must create predefined, prearranged, strategic steps built on the foundation of Christ that help the church mature in the faith.

Additionally, the church needs an organized structure that systematically helps first-time attendees become regular attendees, and regular attendees desire membership. GWC will create systems to take attendees through spiritual maturity and membership. Furthermore, the church was admonished in Hebrews 6:1 with these words, "Leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity." More importantly, they had to get past the basics to biblical maturity, or they would fall away. The writer probably chooses these items as the "basics" because they were the basic instructions about Jewish belief given to converts to Judaism that all readers would have understood before becoming followers of Jesus. These principles embodied Jewish teachings and applied to followers of Christ.⁸⁶

Therefore, Christian maturity is the rudiments of a Christian that are foundational to "Leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity" (Heb 6:1, NIV).

⁸⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, *An Exegetical Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2002: Accessed on October 9, 2022.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Chicago, IL: InterVarsity Press).

Furthermore, believers were not only to repent from dead works, but there ought to be a complete change of attitude toward God, “not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God” (Heb 6:1, NIV). Local churches must assess their overall health, set goals to improve them and track their progress.⁸⁷ Stewardship teaches developing followers of Jesus that God owns it all by divine right, and they are managers by divine permission. Psalms 24:1 reads, “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (NIV). Proper teaching about generosity follows a correct understanding that the handling of money is a direct barometer of where their treasures are. Jesus said, "Where your treasures are, so shall your heart be also" (Matt 6:21, NIV).

The Church Gathers for Missions

Finally, stewardship is a way for the church to put its feet to its faith. Generosity must be cultivated, which implies time. The stewardship system provides the opportunity, means, and mode for people to give at every level in the church. An effective stewardship system will help Christians climb the ladder of generosity from non-giver to extravagant in the church as they grow and mature. Randy Alcorn believes that becoming a fully developed follower of Jesus is only possible by becoming a fully developing steward of their resources.⁸⁸ Jesus said it this way: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt 6:21, NIV).

Searcy argues, “Every dollar you need to do ministry is in the pockets of your people.”⁸⁹ He insists that church members are poorly trained in biblical stewardship.⁹⁰ GWC will include stewardship as essential to returning guests' spiritual development. The theology of stewardship

⁸⁷ McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 199.

⁸⁸ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 2003), 25.

⁸⁹ Searcy and Henson, *Maximize*, 29.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

will be taught throughout the year in life groups and the weekend services. However, first-time and returning guests will not be directly asked or compelled to participate during the offertory. Nevertheless, everyone can cheerfully contribute to the church's mission and celebrate the lives impacted through outreach, missionary support, and community evangelism.

Finally, stewardship in this action research project measures the spiritual development of the heart of returning guests engaged in the church's life and interested in membership. The goal of stewardship at GWC is to help members and guests develop a heart of generosity that reflects the heart of God and Jesus Christ.

Theoretical Foundations

Healthy and sustainable growth for the church in the twenty-first century will depend, firstly, on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Unless Christ builds the church, its laborers will labor in vain (cf. Ps 127:1, NIV). Scripture is the foundation by which the church develops a theological understanding of God's purpose for the church. There is no evidence to suggest that the journey from knowing Christ to growing in Christ is a half-hearted effort by church leadership or new Christians that leads to spiritual maturity.

Therefore, the theological and the theoretical must become the totality of the methodology that takes churches from a plateau and decline to growth and spiritual renewal. This action research will leverage strategically the theological foundation of Christ and theoretical structure to make insiders out of outsiders in the church today. With the decline of Western Christianity, the urgent plea for discipleship models that produce sustained growth and maturity in the church persists. Nevertheless, the call to follow Jesus in a culture obsessed with self-destruction seems to fall on deaf ears. There needs to be more followership. Jesus said to His

first disciples, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fisher of men" (Matt 4:19, NIV). Langer and Jung write, "Followship is at the heart of being a Christian."⁹¹

Analyze and Evaluate Systems

The church should analyze and evaluate historical methods of discipleship making and their impact on church growth today and compare today's cultural, practical, and theoretical landscapes to develop current methods built firmly on the bedrock principle of Scripture.

Theodore Kinni, the author of *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*, wrote, "Get a good idea and stay with it, and work at it until it is done right."⁹² He insists that debugging the system may seem at odds with the maxim of "do it right the first time," but the reality is that doing anything perfectly from the start is a relatively rare occurrence.⁹³

GWC will develop an approach built on the foundation of Matthew 4:19. Turning attendees into members is based on the principle of Followship. Additionally, the church is building on the theological foundation of Christ. Paul wrote, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11, NIV). The theoretical structure builds on the foundation of Christ with walls and roofs that transform God's people into a mystical, spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5, NIV). Therefore, the church will gather in fulfillment of Scripture and invite newcomers to take the next steps in becoming members of the body of Christ and the local church. The next steps at GWC will be a prearranged and predetermined structure called systems. The church systems will help attendees learn to hold unwavering to their faith and stir them toward good works and deeds (Heb 10:2;24, NIV).

⁹¹ Richard Langer and Joanne J. Jung, *The Call to Follow: Hearing Jesus in a Culture Obsessed with Leadership* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 10.

⁹² Kinni, *Be Our Guest*, 165.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 153.

McIntosh and Stevenson wrote, "Any approach to reach, teach, or serve others must eventually be developed into an organized structure."⁹⁴ McIntosh and Stevenson understood that the journey from knowing Christ to maturity in Christ does not happen accidentally. The church must intentionally value the Great Commission of Jesus as the great commandment. Therefore, turning church attendees into committed members requires strategic steps with biblical praxis.

Paul had a theoretical system of biblical principles that helped new Christians mature in the faith. For example, Paul viewed the church as the body of Christ. He wrote, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12, NIV). In Paul's view, healthy churches are intentional with their relationship with God and new believers.

Systems Structured for Growth

There are many indicators in Scripture about the importance of church growth. For example, in the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14, Jesus made the point that the diligent shepherd had a method to determine the state of his flock. Once he became aware of the lost sheep, he arranged to go after it while securing the safety of the ninety-nine sheep that were not lost.

From this passage, the church can do three things: First, the church can be intentional in finding and keeping disciples. Second, the church can grow numerically when it is focused outwardly on reaching the lost. Third, the church can diligently care for those Christ would send among them. Nevertheless, churches often turn to obscure and untested practices that are not clear precedence established by Scripture. Alan Hirsch wrote, "I have taken this approach because we need to constantly remind ourselves at this point in history that if we fall in love with

⁹⁴ McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 175.

our system, whatever that is, we lose the capacity to change it.”⁹⁵ Sometimes, systems must be changed, modified, upgraded, or done away with for the church to stay relevant in the established community.

Replace Obsolete Systems

God's Word is unchanging and without an expiration date. Therefore, God's principles are unchanging, but systems that administer biblical principles must constantly be evaluated and changed.⁹⁶ For example, Sunday school was once the most effective way to disciple.

Unfortunately, few churches use the Sunday school model today. Mark Wingfield wrote, “In traditional churches like ours, adult Sunday school has been the glue that kept people together during the pandemic.”⁹⁷ Nevertheless, church consultant Carol Childress suggested that among four indicators of churches that will navigate a post-pandemic world successfully is “an infrastructure for a community built on anything other than the traditional Sunday school model.”⁹⁸

Wingfield argues that 85 percent of their Sunday morning attendance is from Sunday school.⁹⁹ Like other models built on Scripture, the Sunday school model will transform babies in Christ into complete, mature saints. The problem is different from the principles founded on Scripture; the problem is with traditional and outdated systems used to administer the principles. Conversely, scholars and church consultants agree on the state of the American church.

⁹⁵ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 380.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Mark Wingfield, *What will happen to Sunday School?* (May 2021): Retrieved May 29, 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/article/what-will-become-of-sunday-school/#.YpQQZO7MJPY>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

However, they have differing views on how to fix the problem. Once again, the church needs structure or systems.

Systems must be evaluated and changed whenever necessary. Scholars have written about the church system approach. Many of those systems are not identified individually for the church. For example, McIntosh and Stevenson wrote, "You organize the church's systems to support the vision."¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the authors do not connect the dots in the book between vision and individual church systems. However, Nelson Searcy identifies the eight systems in the church.

Assimilation System

Searcy argues that healthy churches have good systems and subsystems. The eight systems of the church, according to Searcy, are 1) weekend service system, 2) evangelism system, 3) assimilation system, 4) small groups system, 5) volunteer system, 6) stewardship system, 7) leadership system, and 8) strategic system.¹⁰¹ According to Searcy, every church has subsystems, whether or not they are aware of them. He wrote, "For effectiveness and efficiency, the church must regularly monitor and improve the eight church systems which will enable it to lead each individual who comes into contact with the church in the process of permanent spiritual growth."¹⁰²

There were 631 respondents to the question about which one of Searcy's eight church systems should be improved within five years. Forty-seven percent of respondents said the

¹⁰⁰ McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 171.

¹⁰¹ Nelson Searcy, "Healthy Systems, Healthy Church." *Church Leader Insights* (January 2014): Retrieved May 29, 2022, <https://churchleaderinsights.com/healthy-systems-healthy-church>.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

strategy system would need to be updated.¹⁰³ The strategy system evaluates the other seven systems for constant improvement. The results from the questionnaire confirm Searcy's premise about church systems. Searcy believes that church systems must be evaluated and updated to guide people coming into the church through ongoing spiritual development.

Gateway Church builds on Searcy's church system approach in two ways. First, by focusing on the most critical systems in every church; second, by harnessing the power of biblical hospitality. GWC believes that biblical hospitality should be an ongoing system in the church because, without it, assimilation is impossible. Searcy values biblical hospitality in the church and includes it as part of assimilation.

Searcy believes that assimilation is simply well-planned biblical hospitality.¹⁰⁴ GWC agrees with Searcy's conclusion and treats biblical hospitality as a church system. Three of the eight systems Searcy advocates have minimum importance without the health and effectiveness of the other five systems. Additionally, God has organized the church into systems, but paradoxically, many churches do not have a system approach—which limits their effectiveness in carrying out the mission.¹⁰⁵

God's Affinity for Systems

Paul understood God's affinity for systems. It explains why Paul wrote, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function" (Rom 12:4, NIV). Churches that lack a theoretical system built on the foundation of Scripture

¹⁰³ Jane Mundi Mbacham-Enow, "The System Approach For a Healthy Church: A Case Study of Christian Communities in Yaoundé, Cameroon" (2019) Accessed on October 7, 2021, *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* Volume 9, Issue 2, <https://religioninsociety.com>.

¹⁰⁴ Searcy and Henson, *Fusion*, 43.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Mundi Mbacham-Enow, *The System Approach for a Healthy Church* (Volume 9, Issue 2, 2019): Retrieved May 28, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v09i02/43-53> (Article)

will struggle to achieve sustainable growth and to take first-time guests through the process, from attendees to members. Gateway church will build on the foundation of Christ with six critical systems: weekend service, biblical hospitality, assimilation, small groups, volunteerism, and stewardship.

Prearranged and predetermined structures called systems provide the local church with processes with intentional application that are strategic and take people through the process of knowing Christ and growing in Christ. In fact, the weekend service will provide the most significant opportunity for people to hear and respond to the gospel.

Coincidentally, in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he wrote, "practice hospitality" (Rom 12:13, NIV). Therefore, Gateway Church will apply biblical hospitality at every level of engagement with attendees and church members. Biblical hospitality represents the foundation upon which assimilation is built.

GWC will determine an effective ministry-delivering system that is evaluated and updated from the information it gathers from first-time and returning guests to the church.

This system is relationship-driven and necessitates the ministry of a competent, dedicated team. Follow-up with first-time and returning guests is the backbone of assimilation. GWC will design a follow-up methodology that provides consistent feedback, evaluations, and updates.

The assimilation system at GWC will work in partnership with small groups and the church's volunteer ministry. These ministries are linked to help returning guests feel comfortable taking the next step toward membership.

Conclusion

A church is not like a Fortune 500 company, nor is it simply another nonprofit organization or a social club. A healthy church is unlike any organization that man has ever

devised because man did not devise it.¹⁰⁶ The foundation by which the church is established is Jesus Christ. The theological foundation of the church is the work of grace, resting firmly on salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8-9, NIV). The church can remain relevant and a solid sub-culture in a broken world when the theoretical framework of the church rests firmly on the theological foundation.

Christians must move beyond saving faith in Christ to greater insight and revelation through the Holy Spirit. This knowledge and insight require a deeper love for God and spiritual self-discipline from regular Bible reading, prayer, worship of God, serving, and cheerful giving. Therefore, the church should be intentional in its efforts to help Christians build on the foundation of Christ with an ongoing strategic methodology that results in spiritual growth.

This action research will look at how GWC can strategically build on the theological foundation of Christ and a theoretical structure with prearranged and predefined systems that intentionally help new Christians take the next step toward spiritual maturity in the church. An effective congregational system takes the guesswork out of the church and turns insiders out of outsiders in the church today. Volunteers primarily drive church ministries. Outward-focused churches rely on healthy volunteer systems to recruit, train, and engage people in ministries inside and outside the church.

Churches structured for growth will have a robust volunteer system. The small group system at GWC is ideally designed for fellowship and discipleship. Firstly, it enables returning guests and members to feel like they belong. Helping guests overcome the hurdle of feeling like strangers in the church is one of the goals of small groups and volunteer ministry.

¹⁰⁶ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build a Healthy Church*, 31.

The early church often met from house to house to break bread together. No wonder they were glad and sincere-hearted; they enjoyed each other's favor, and the Lord added daily to their numbers (Acts 2:46-27). In those days, there were no men's or women's ministries, no modern Sunday schools, or regular weekend services like today. Nevertheless, there are some distinctions between the early church that God intends for today's church.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This thesis project follows a detailed process that explains the approach used to identify project participants and the steps used to get their permission for the research project. The process ensures the integrity of the research and is presented systematically. This DMIN action research project comprises an intervention design followed by the method and implementation for GWC. Cumulatively, these sections provide the impetus for the importance of this research, a description of the research setting, and the anticipated ministry impact for Gateway Church.

Intervention Design

This project section describes the impetus for and the significance of this research. The problem is that Gateway Church lacks a theoretical system to guide guests through the process from attendees to members. The aim is to develop and initiate a strategy with biblical steps designed to help attendees become committed church members. Ultimately, it will clarify congregational systems' practical and theological importance in helping the church grow and mature in Christ. McIntosh and Stevenson wrote, "Programs and church ministries are good and necessary in all churches. However, any approach to reach, teach, or serve others must eventually be developed into an organized structure."¹ Therefore, the urgency of helping the local church reach and keep first-time guests cannot be overstated.

¹ McIntosh & Stevenson, 175.

Church System

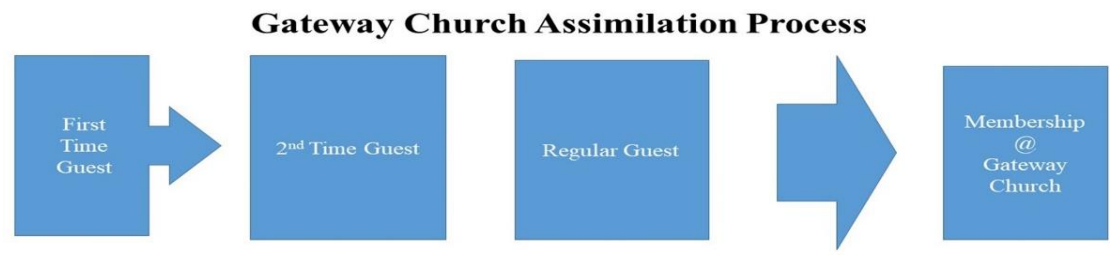


Figure 1. Attender to Member Assimilation.

The success of the church congregational system depends on three vital things: A discipleship mechanism, a process of assimilation, and helping first-time guests become committed members of the local church. The church system GWC uses is implemented and evaluated to determine whether it accomplishes the three goals mentioned. First, address the concerns a pre-visitor might have before attending a service. Second, prepare for first-time guests and meet or beat their expectations. Third, effective follow-up with first-time and regular guests to the church to invite them back. See figure 2 for an illustration of how the church analyzes its congregation system.

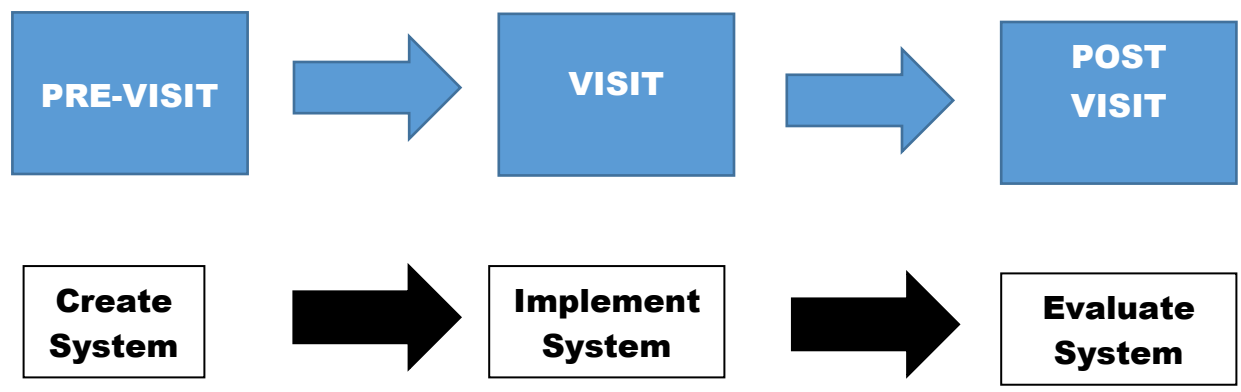


Figure 2. Steps to Analyze Church System.

Method

The methodology is a step-by-step impetus to address the problem at the Gateway Church of lacking a theoretical system to guide newcomers through the process, from attendees to members. The goal of this research is to use both a theological and theoretical foundation to take returning guests at GWC from attendees to committed members in approximately six months, depending on their level of engagement. Jonathan Gainsbrugh wrote, "The common statistic is that 50% of new members drop out of their churches within the first 12 months after joining."² Gainsbrugh believes that when new members feel they have done all they can to belong, they are going to say, so long.³ Therefore, the methodology used by GWC is intentional with biblical steps and time sensitive.

The implementation of this research study happens in three phases: Retention, Relationship, and Responsibility.

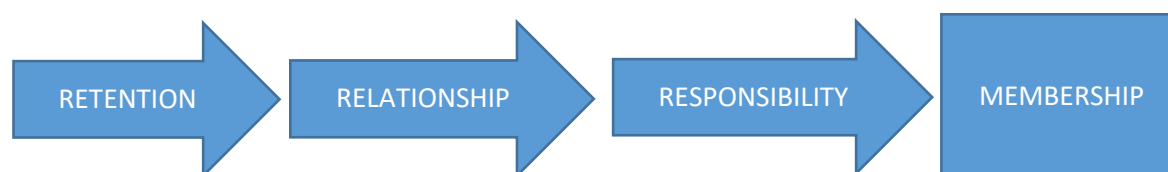


Figure 3. Three-Phase Congregational System.

Request Permission

The researcher is the senior pastor. The bylaws of GWC do not require the senior pastor to seek approval from a higher authority to organize teams, assign roles, select participants, and

² Gainsbrugh, Jonathan, *Winning the Backdoor War* (Placerville, CA: Gainsbrugh Resource Ministries, 1993), 127.

³ *Ibid*, 129.

delegate tasks in this project. Stakeholders in this research are founding members of the church and people in leadership positions. Nevertheless, the researcher requested and received permission from the board of directors to conduct this DMIN action research to ensure integrity. See Appendix C for a copy of the permission document. Additionally, some of the stakeholders comprise the church leadership team.

Research Location

The local ministry context for this DMIN action research thesis is Gateway Church, located in Columbus, Georgia. Fort Moore, formally Fort Benning military training base, is located just outside Columbus, with a population of about 120,000.⁴ Thus, the population of Columbus and Fort Moore is approximately 337,000 residents. GWC is in the 31907 zip code, with 55,332 residents in East Columbus.⁵

The current location meets the criteria for a successful research project with a strategic location, plenty of parking, attractive grounds, appropriate indoor and outdoor signage, clean and neat facilities, and clean public restrooms. Searcy believes assimilation encourages first-time guests to return to the local church until they experience God's presence and power, accept Christ as Savior, and commit to church membership.⁶ Unfortunately, guests and their families will not return to a church where they have had a bad first impression. Therefore, the research location must be prepared to accept guests.

⁴ The Maneuver Center of Excellence, "*Assignment Content: Welcome Guide.*"

⁵ Demographics, "*Columbus Georgia, ZIP Code 31907,*" (2018): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/31907/#:~:text=ZIP%20code%2031907%20is%20located%20in%20western%20Georgia,code%2031907%20are%20primarily%20black%20or%20African%20American.>

⁶ Searcy and Henson, 28.

Recruitment

There are two levels of recruitment for this research project. At the first level, the researcher recruits several members to follow up with first-time and returning guests to the church. Refer to Appendix E for the verbal permission and consent statement of the follow-up team. Ushers are responsible for placing the connection cards in seatback pockets of chairs in the main auditorium before and after the service to be used by participants in the research. Additionally, connection cards are used by non-participants as well.

Ushers collect the connection cards during the offertory in the church service and compile them for the researcher. The researcher retrieves the cards and records the data using an online service called, Text in Church. This online service securely stores the data and permits the church to text and email guests instantly or at a later date and time. The data is also stored with another online service called Constant Contact. This online service enables the church to create newsletters and promotions as advertisements for guests.

The researcher gives connection cards to a follow-up team, and they contact the first time and returning guests to the church after the weekend services. The follow-up team has access to Text in Church, an online fee service that provides emails and text messages to multiple people at one time. The follow-up team uses their personal phones to make calls and use Text in Church for emails and text messages. Refer to Appendix F, O, and P for scripts to text, email, and calls to GWC guests after the weekend service.

At the second level, participants for this action research project are selected based on a certain number of returns to the church and agreement to participate. Project participants in this research will consist of returning guests to GWC who are not current church members or any other. In addition, they reside in the community surrounding the church or live a reasonable

distance from the church to participate in the research actively. The researcher will recruit participants directly from the research location during regularly scheduled services and church-related events.

Additionally, potential participants are selected using the data collected from connect cards retrieved during regular scheduled or special services at the church. The data collected from the cards is used to track the attendance of returning guests over five weeks. The researcher contacts potential participants who meet the criteria for the research project and asks for their permission to participate.

There are no participants in this research project who are separated by age, gender, or race. Therefore, no limit will be set for the number of participants, although a minimum of ten participants is required according to the Doctor of Ministry Program and Candidacy Handbook. Nevertheless, potential participants who meet the qualifications outlined in the session are called project participants.

Project Participants

Project participants will consist of first-time and returning guests to GWC of at least eighteen years of age. For instance, the membership requirement at GWC, according to the bylaws, is eighteen years and above. Additionally, guests must return at least three times in six weeks before the researcher will ask for their consent to participate in the study. Participants in this research study cannot be active or inactive members of another church.

However, returning guests to the church who have been absent for one year will qualify as potential participants in this study. Conversely, previous members of GWC who have returned after a period will not be included in this research study. Participants in this research study can elect not to participate or withdraw at any time. Furthermore, this DMIN action research

addresses the problem of GWC's need for more theoretical systems to turn attendees into members. Therefore, participants will reside in the community surrounding the church or live a reasonable distance from the church to participate in the project actively.

Request Consent

Verbal participation is the preferred method to request consent in the action research project. However, the church may allow the use of a written request for consent from participants in this research study for selected newcomers. See a copy of the verbal recruitment document in Appendix A. Additionally, written or verbal consent precedes participating in this action research or completing any research questionnaires. They do not precede the completion of connection cards retrieved during regular scheduled or special services at the church. Appendix B of this action research shows a copy of the consent letter.

Implementation of Intervention Design

Retention of Guests

If the researcher creates strategic steps with fundamental biblical praxis, then the church will help first-time and returning guests transition from attendees to committed church members. Retention is the goal in the first phase for newcomers to the church. Each phase is critical and builds on the next, except for retention. Before guests visit the church, they are a pre-visitor in this research.

The pre-visitor to GWC comprises a population in Columbus 2020 of 207,000,⁷ The population of Fort Moore, formally Fort Benning military training base, located outside

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau: "Quick-Facts," (July 2021): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Muscogee County, Georgia>.

Columbus, is about 120,000.⁸ Thus, the population of Columbus and Fort Moore is approximately 337,000 residents. Additionally, the population of the community surrounding the church is 55,332 residents.⁹

Retention is predictable when the church knows the demographic of its community and prepares for first-time guests. For example, the condition of the church grounds, convenient parking, and the overall facility's condition are essential in this phase. This research project began around the completion of GWC's new church building. In anticipation of the research, the research location is in sync with the project's purpose.

Rendel and Parks, authors of *Intentional Church*, insist that the weekend worship service is the starting point for many on their spiritual journey.¹⁰ The early church was admonished not to give up on meeting together (Heb 10:25). The weekend service provides the best opportunity for the spiritual growth and maturity of the saints. Therefore, the weekend service is the starting point for turning attendees into church members.

The Weekend Service and Retention

The weekend service system plans, implements and evaluates essential ministries when the church gathers to meet and exceed the expectations of first-time guests. The music, preaching, and offering are essential matrices constantly evaluated in healthy churches and progressively improved over time. The weekend service is planned for people to have the best possible opportunity to have a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit and respond to a presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁸ The Maneuver Center of Excellence, "*Assignment Content: Welcome Guide.*"

⁹ Demographics, "*Columbus Georgia, ZIP Code 31907.*"

¹⁰ Bart Rendel and Doug Parks, *Intentional Church: How to Implement an Operation System Clarifies Vision, Improves Decision Making, and Stimulates Growth* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 202), 105.

GWC believes that the initial attraction for guests in the weekend service is how they are greeted at the door, how they are treated as guests, and how they are directed and seated in the service. The church practices biblical hospitality, and greeters are first responders; therefore, how guests are greeted and treated upon arrival makes a lasting impression. See Appendix L for a copy of the standard hospitality procedures (SHP) for greeters at GWC. They are coached on how to greet guests properly; they are instructed on how and when they should open doors for guests. Additionally, greeters are expected to know the locations of core ministries and how to direct newcomers to their desired destinations.

The atmosphere, uplifting worship songs, and sermons are the most relevant in the retention phase. Adequate follow-up is critical to retaining first-time and returning guests. Additionally, the process of assimilation becomes a factor in the next phase, called relationships. The treatment of first-time and returning guests is essential to assimilation. If guests do not feel welcome, they are unlikely to return. Therefore, biblical hospitality and assimilation must be an ongoing church ethos process. It must, therefore, be intentional and relationship-driven. Johnathan Gainsbrugh, the author of *Winning the Backdoor War*, insists that "Hospitality Mentality is something every church needs not only to have but constantly work on improving."¹¹

Retention through Follow-up

A team of trained volunteers will follow up with first-time and returning guests within twenty-four to thirty-six hours of their visit and approximately five consecutive times following their initial visit to the church. The follow-up procedure for this action research is found in

¹¹ Jonathan Gainsbrugh, *Winning the Backdoor War* (Placerville, CA: Gainsbrugh Resource Ministries, 1993), 90.

Appendix F, O, and P. Searcy insists there are three “F’s” of follow-up: fast, friendly, and functional.¹² GWC will not offer gifts or giveaways as a promotion to attract visitors to the church. However, the church will give gifts like movie tickets, coffee mugs, and gas cards to first-time guests to get them to return.

Initially, follow-up is usually a text message, email, or letter. A brief phone call is made to returning guests after their third visit. The purpose of the phone call is to help guests enter the relationship phase of assimilation. The scripted text or email message will include a, thank you for coming, gain feedback about the experience and invite them back for another visit. When guests visit for a third time, they are considered returning guests and potential participants in this research study.

The researcher tracked the attendance of GWC guests on their return to the church. Guests who return to GWC at least three times in six weeks are designated regular guests and potential participants. Regular guests are asked verbally to consent to the action research study. A verbal consent statement is found in Appendix A. However, the church also has written consent forms as an alternative. Most participants in this study are emailed a brief questionnaire to complete online and submit, and some of them will receive a take-home questionnaire to complete and return at the next weekend service. The questionnaire helped the researcher gauge the level of interest and satisfaction of newcomers about the church on their recent visits. The following table shows the step-by-step follow-up process.

¹² Searcy and Henson, 91.

Table 1.1. Follow-up process for Gateway Church.

| | |
|---------------|--|
| STEP 1 | <p>First-time guests attend GWC.</p> <p>All guests are asked to fill out a “Connection Card during the service.”</p> <p>The cards are collected by ushers during the offertory and compiled for the researcher.</p> <p>The researcher collects the cards and gives them to the follow-up team.</p> <p>The follow-up team contacts guests within 36 hours of their visit.</p> <p>Guests are briefly asked about their experience and invited to another service or event.</p> |
| STEP 2 | <p>Guests returning three times are asked to participate in the action research project.</p> <p>Participants are asked to use connection cards to track their attendance.</p> <p>The follow-up team tracked participants' attendance for five consecutive visits.</p> |
| STEP 3 | <p>Guests returning more than three times are considered "Regular Guests" and will be verbally asked to participate in the project.</p> <p>Participants are given or emailed a "Questionnaire" to complete and return by the next service. The goal of the questionnaire is to gain feedback about the participant's overall satisfaction with GWC at the time.</p> <p>After five visits, the researcher contacts participants to gauge their interest in volunteer ministry or small groups.</p> <p>Effective Follow-up with guests within 36 hours of their visit.</p> |
| STEP 4 | <p>Participants are encouraged to enroll in small groups or volunteer ministries after nine weeks by a follow-up team or researcher for relationship connection.</p> <p>Participants in small groups or volunteer ministry are followed up by group leaders.</p> |
| STEP 5 | <p>Participants will commit to a sit-down interview after 14 weeks of attendance for three purposes: To give the researcher insight into the new congregation system's effectiveness, to get relevant information to improve the assimilation process, and to assess the readiness of participants for membership.</p> |
| STEP 6 | <p>Participants ready for the responsibility of membership are invited to join the church.</p> |

Data Collection

The church used a mixed method for data collection that is quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, GWC used a series of connection cards to collect data that tracked the number of first-time attendees, frequency of attendance, and how many were showing an interest in the church. Additionally, these cards are used to track the number of commitments that newcomers make to Christ and their desire for water baptism. The researcher used the number of participants (ten) in the project as a baseline and calculated the percentage of dropouts or those interested in taking the next step in their spiritual growth at the church.

The church uses volunteer coordinators and small group facilitators to monitor participants during the relationship phase of the study by recording their attendance. In this phase, the researcher is interested in whether participants are being assimilated. Participants who are absent from the church for more than three weeks in this phase are contacted by the researcher for follow-up. Qualitatively, the church is using a combination of interviews, questionnaires, and observations to gather data for detailed analysis. A qualitative analysis will record the response of churchgoers to high-touch biblical hospitality, worship songs, and core ministry offerings. It will gauge the effectiveness of assimilation. Furthermore, the church will learn the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the facility, grounds, cleanliness, and overall feel of the church. See figure 4 for an illustration of the data collection process in the project.

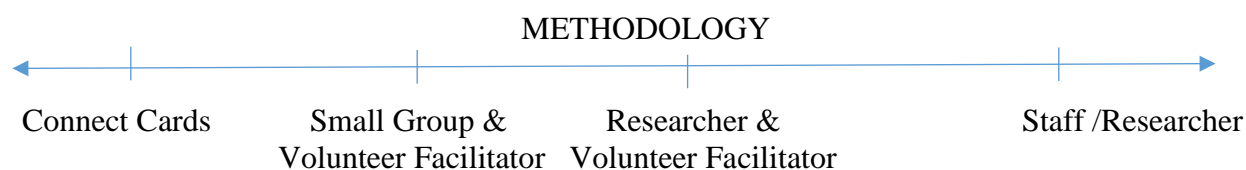


Figure 4. Data Collection Methodology.

The researcher leveraged literature on church growth to design information cards called "connection cards" or "connect cards" for three purposes: first, to track the church attendance of participants in the weekend service; second, to gauge the interest of participants in volunteering and small group connections, and third, to determine the interest of participants for membership.

The researcher ensures that first-time and returning guests receive a connection card and are encouraged to fill them out. Additionally, the church will use digital connect cards alternatively through Text in Church. Returning guests will only sign, date, and indicate the number of visits on connect cards. Refer to Appendix G for an illustration of this process. The connect card will specifically ask for names and best contact numbers, including email addresses.¹³ See figures 5 and 6.

connected

FRONT **Connection-Card**

Dr. / Mr. / Mrs. / Miss / Ms. Today's Date: ____/____/____

Name: _____ **Change in contact information**

(please print):

1st time guest

2nd time guest

3rd time guest

4th time guest

Regular Guest

Member

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Best Contact Phone (____) _____ Email _____

Birthday ____/____/____ Member of what Church? _____
Month Year

Occupation: _____

Occupation: _____

If 1st or 2nd time guest, how did you hear about Gateway? _____
(Name of person who invited you, postcard, mailer, newspaper)

Place this card in the offering bag when you're given the chance or give it to an attendant (usher) on the way out. Thank you!

Figure 5. Connection Card-Front.

¹³ Searcy and Henson, 179.

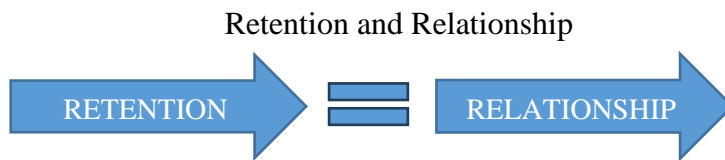
| BACK | |
|--|---|
| <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">MY NEXT STEP TODAY IS TO:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make Jesus Christ the Lord of my life. <input type="checkbox"/> Commit to becoming <i>a fully developing follower of Jesus Christ.</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Become an excited member of Gateway Church. <input type="checkbox"/> Come back next Sunday & invite a friend. | <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">SEND ME INFO ABOUT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Becoming a follower of Jesus. <input type="checkbox"/> Serving @ Gateway Church. <input type="checkbox"/> Membership @ Gateway Church. <input type="checkbox"/> Water Baptism. <input type="checkbox"/> Automating my Giving. |
| <p>Comments : _____</p> <p>Prayer Requests: _____</p> <p>_____</p> | |

Figure 6. Connection Card, back.

Additionally, the connect card allows guests to request more information about the church, prayer, pastoral counseling, volunteer, or sign up for small groups. Furthermore, the back of the connect cards contains the next steps for guests. For example, one of the next step options for guests is to invite a friend to the next service at GWC. The connect card is collected by ushers during the church service and separated for the researcher.

The researcher receives all connect cards and then records and monitors church attendance, engagement interests, and prayer requests. Finally, the research data is stored securely in a database. Next, the follow-up team gets the names of returning guests, prayer requests, and their engagement interests on hand during follow-up. Access to collected data is limited to those assigned by the researcher.

The researcher is using a database to monitor the process of assimilation of participants, including the frequency of their visits and involvement in the church's life. Evaluating the data collected from participants helps improve the congregational system used by GWC to reach newcomers to the church and keep them.



Second, phase two, Relationship, is vital to assimilation at GWC. Regular guests should have attended a service six times between the ninth and the twelfth week. At this point, they are encouraged to join a small group connection or participate in volunteer ministry. The aim is to help regular guests feel like they belong and make essential relationship connections. In this phase, the researcher actively integrates regular guests into the church's life. In this phase, the researcher interacts with returning guests to assign tasks and roles. The data collected is thorough enough to predict engagement interest rather than commitment.

The researcher connects participants with a small group and volunteer ministry facilitator to assess their interests and find a place to serve and belong. In this phase, effective follow-up happens within small groups and volunteer ministry. The follow-up goal in this phase is consistent with the stated purpose of effective follow-up, Retention.

Figure 7 contains active volunteer ministries and small groups in the church. The researcher uses volunteer ministries and small groups as points of entry for newcomers to the church. The church frequently recruits volunteers and mobilizes them for short-term tasks and ministry assignments. Connection cards, first-serve cards, and small groups are the primary recruitment methods. Volunteers are urged to use these methods to sign up and serve at each volunteer ministry opportunity.

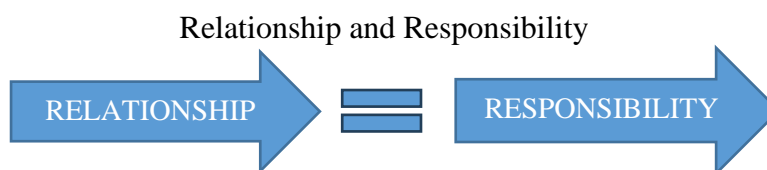
Small groups are an intentional church strategy to connect people regularly for relationships and a common purpose. Small groups provide an environment for connection, community, and spiritual formation. Church-wide campaigns are used to promote small groups. Small groups at GWC are short-term, not long-term. Mobilizing small groups for the long term

led to precipitous attrition at GWC. The church's new approach to small groups is working well. Additionally, this approach works exceptionally well for connecting newcomers regularly for a common purpose and ministry. A copy of the small group signup and strategy is included in Appendix H, I, J, and K of this project.

The church schedules the small group and promotes it over four weeks prior to the start date. The church announces the signup and deadline. Newcomers to the church are recruited during the routine follow-up, during the weekend service, volunteer ministry, and active groups they are currently participating in.

| Volunteer Ministry | Small Groups |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Children Ministry | Bible-Fellowship Group |
| Greeters Ministry | Women Ministry |
| Hospitality Ministry | Men Ministry |
| Ushers Ministry | Thrive Small Group |
| Music Ministry | |
| Student Ministry | |
| Outreach Ministry | |

Figure 7. Active volunteer ministries and small groups.



The third phase prepares participants for responsibility in the church. By this time, the participants should have attended a weekend service or small group connection long enough to be assimilated into the church. During this phase, participants will have a sit-down interview

with the researcher. The interview is conducted near the end of the research study. Most participants are at different levels of spiritual development and readiness for responsibility. Therefore, in this phase, the researcher evaluates whether participants are ready for the responsibility of church membership. The researcher looks at the data collected to determine a participant's frequency of attendance, their involvement in volunteer ministry or small groups, and their giving. The researcher seeks to discover the intersection between relationship and responsibility in the church. Gainsbrugh stated that Chip Arn, in *the Church Growth Ratio Book*, stated that every new member should have developed a minimum of seven friendships within the first six months after joining the church.¹⁴ Using that ratio, GWC hypothesizes that high retention rates equate to stronger relationships, and stronger relationships equate to greater responsibilities in the church.

Figure 8 is a graphic representation of the ratio between relationship and responsibility. Conversely, a low relationship ratio equates to a low or enate responsibility in the church. Therefore, the researcher is focused on relationships first and responsibility separately. Moreover, the process of assimilation at GWC is dependent on relationship building through volunteer ministries and small group connections.

¹⁴ Gainsbrugh, *Winning the Backdoor War*, 130.

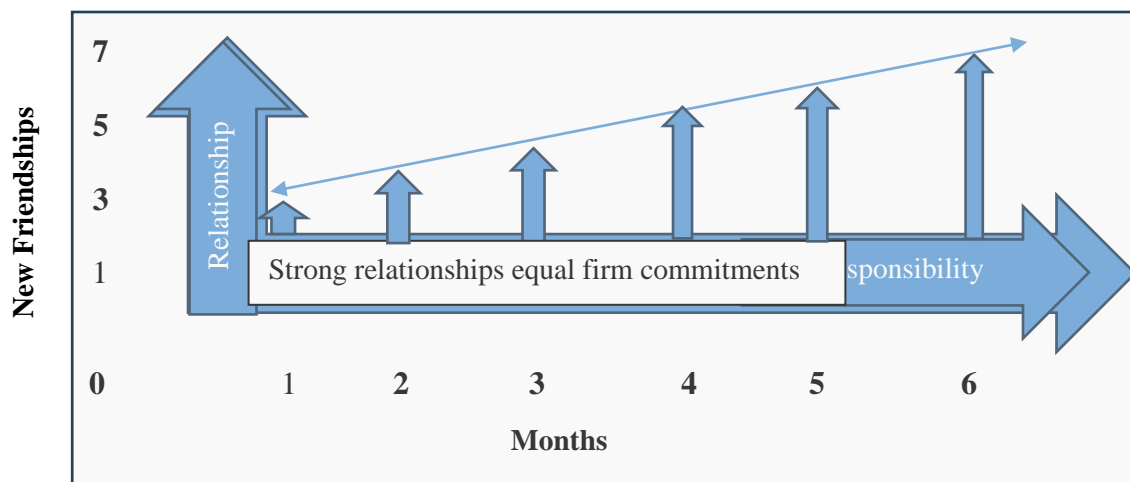
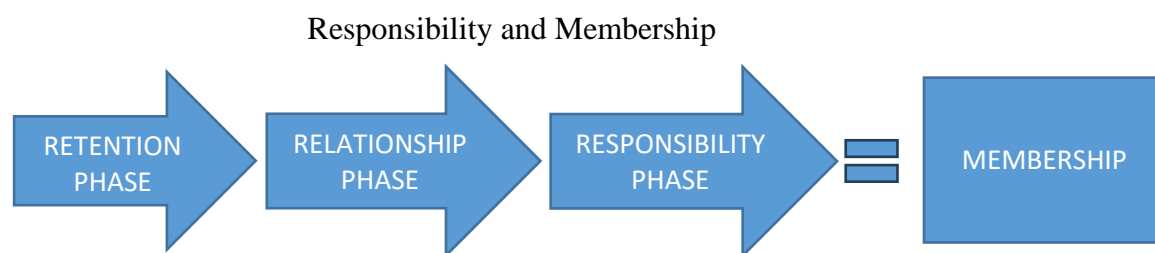


Figure 8. The correlation between relationship and responsibility.

For example, attendees are asked to serve alongside members during an outreach where they work together to accomplish an essential task for the event's success that is celebrated by the entire team. The leadership, facilitators, and researchers play a vital role in relationship-building at these scheduled events.



Searcy believes that responsibility and ownership go hand in hand. He argues, "When we take ownership over something ourselves, we naturally feel an accompanying sense of responsibility toward it."¹⁵ It has been previously stated that solid relationships in the church

¹⁵ Nelson Searcy, *Fusion*, 140.

equate with more substantial commitments that lead to responsibilities. Responsibility is the catalyst that moves regular attendance to membership.¹⁶

The researcher will use the combination of a personal interview and a questionnaire to determine whether a participant is ready for membership. The interview will accomplish three purposes: it will allow the researcher to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the congregation system, obtain relevant information to improve the process of assimilation, and assess whether participants are ready for the responsibility of membership.

Questionnaire and Interview

A completed questionnaire by a participant will inform the researcher about their satisfaction with the church and rate their overall experience over five weeks. The sit-down interview, on the other hand, happens after thirteen weeks of attending and determines the participant's readiness for the responsibility of membership. Participants are given a questionnaire to take home and complete, then return on their next visit. See Appendix E for the participant questionnaire and sit-down interview questions.

The period between the fifth week and the thirteenth week aims to help participants make relationship connections and make the research study feel more organic than a research project. Participants in this research project who are assimilated beyond nine weeks are allowed a sit-down interview. This interview takes place in the "responsibility" phase, as regular guests are considered for membership. The sit-down interview will tell the researcher whether participants are still satisfied with the church. If not, discover why the change and it will allow the researcher to talk about church membership and inquire if the participant is ready for the responsibility of membership.

¹⁶ Nelson Searcy, *Fusion*, 141.

The researcher can discuss the responsibility phase related to small groups and volunteer opportunities. Additionally, the stewardship system becomes more relevant in the responsibility phase because one of the responsibilities of membership is a commitment to support the church's mission according to its abilities. For example, the church has several ways for congregants to give that is safe and secure. Refer to Appendix M in this study for an overview of the stewardship system. The stewardship system of the church teaches biblical principles on giving, and it provides a variety of ways and opportunities for the church to give. The importance of giving ranks among key disciplines like prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance.

Jesus did not underestimate the importance of money in people's lives when He warned, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matt 6:24, NIV). Lastly, newcomers to the church are given a biblical reason to give and the opportunity to participate. Participants in this action research who cross the threshold of responsibility are asked about membership in the church.

Membership

Membership represents the commitment between church members and the church to strive toward maturity in Christ. A Welcome to Membership class is offered to candidates that include a printed publication that addresses the responsibility of members. A digital publication that addresses the responsibility of membership is available upon request. Membership aims to produce committed followers of Jesus Christ who are committed to the church and Christian maturity. The privilege of membership is the opportunity to participate, lead, direct, and engage other systems in the church. Membership aims to produce followers of Jesus Christ who are committed to the church and Christian maturity.

First, membership candidates are urged to attend a class called, Before You Join the Church. This class covers the same material as a Welcome to Membership class offered by GWC. The difference is that one class is offered to attendees to spark their interest in membership, while the other is offered to those seeking membership. Although candidates for membership are urged to attend the class, it is not mandatory. However, new members signing a membership covenant agreement is mandatory.

A membership covenant agreement addresses the requirements for church members, which is explained in the Welcome to Membership class. See Appendix S for a copy of GWC's membership covenant agreement and Appendix T for a copy of the Before You Join the Church brochure. The agreement is explained in detail, and questions raised are answered at this time. Upon signing the membership covenant agreement, attendees cross the threshold of membership. Subsequently, new members are welcomed during a regularly scheduled church service and are greeted by the rest of the church body. A luncheon is scheduled in their honor to connect them with other new church members.

Summary of Intervention Design

This action research project objectively studied past approaches to understanding church growth and used the knowledge to address the need for revitalization today. The researcher used insight from the literary review to address the problem of not having a congregational system that turned newcomers to the church into committed members in the church.

Six distinct systems were created to reach newcomers and keep them. These systems have a theological foundation to reach the lost and teach the saved. It is understood that there can be numerous systems in a church that determine how well they accomplish their mission in a

community. However, there are critical systems that are necessary for a church to thrive in good health.

McIntosh and Stevenson wrote, "Programs and church ministries are good and necessary in all churches. However, any approach to reach, teach, or serve others must eventually be developed into an organized structure."¹⁷ The next chapter contains the results from the implementation of the intervention design outlined and discussed in this chapter.

¹⁷ McIntosh and Stevenson, 175.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This action research postulates that a first-time guest to the church can be taken on a journey from attender to member in a specific amount of time. When certain conditions are met, a first-time guest will become a returning guest, and a returning guest will transition from attender to member. This action research makes the case that when similar churches create strategic steps with fundamental biblical praxis, the church can help first-timers become returning guests and returning guests become regular guests. Regular guests can go from attendees to committed church members.

Therefore, the church must master the art of retention before a relationship. This action research walks through each phase and records the results. This study has three phases: retention, relationship, and responsibility before membership. Each phase is critical and requires preparation and dedication to achieve the spiritual transformation goal for church newcomers. For instance, the church needs a pipeline of newcomers to the church. Churches assume that people in the community know their love for Christ, welcoming atmosphere, and transformational preaching.

That assumption is a myth; the church must attract newcomers to the church in hopes of entering a relationship that leads to membership. Therefore, the church must retain newcomers and begin a relationship. Phase three is essential to membership at GWC, and most participants in this research were retained. They entered a long-term relationship with the church but have not shifted from relationship to responsibility and, therefore, were not ready for membership in the church. For example, two participants can easily make the shift to membership. They serve and

give regularly. Nevertheless, they are not ready to commit. This action research focuses on creating the conditions for first-time guests to become returning guests and for returning guests to become members. Probing the rationale for why regular guests are hesitant or not interested in becoming members after meeting the condition of responsibility is separate from this study.

Nevertheless, the results show that most participants were ready to join, and half requested it before the end of the research. Additionally, the data shows that other participants were involved and belonged but were not seeking membership for an undisclosed reason. This chapter is divided into four sections: Intervention Design Improvement, Collective Results, Data Analysis, and Summary of Results.

Areas of Intervention Design Improvement

Areas for intervention design improvement were data collection, take-home interview questionnaires, and final in-person interviews. Data collection in this project necessitated taking a longer-term view. The unpredictability of the week-to-week attendance of participants made it necessary to adjust the timeline of success for both the retention and relationship phases. Pokluda said, "Shared experiences have the ability to fuse people together, often even those who would not have made sense together outside of that context."¹The church used strategic steps to create shared experiences in the relationship phase of the research, although it took longer than anticipated.

Therefore, the timeline for this action research was extended to six months to allow for the assimilation process from attender to member. Participants were not rushed or controlled in the action research, which would have skewed the data collected. The research data show that church visitors do not always disclose their interest in a relationship with Jesus Christ or why

¹Jonathan Pokluda, *Welcoming the Future Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 25.

they return after the first visit. Unchurched people do not usually make quantum shifts from outsiders to insiders in the church within a few months, regardless of their experience in the community. Searcy writes, "Many first-time guests are dragged to church by someone else. When they decide to return, it is usually out of their own volition."²

The shift is subtle, not immediate. Nevertheless, it is genuine. This action research demonstrates that having strategic steps to greet, treat, direct, and seat church visitors will exponentially increase their chances of returning. Furthermore, the take-home surveys were concise, organized, and easy to complete. Nevertheless, they were not returned as expected. An alternative, easy access, complete, and return method was needed.

The church developed a digital survey and then emailed or texted it to participants, who completed and submitted it online or via text. Each participant responded within thirty-six hours of receiving the survey. Lastly, the sit-down interview was modified for convenience because 70 percent of participants in this project requested membership before the sit-down interview.

Alternatively, the church created an exit research interview for selected participants in a digital format. The digital interview was emailed or texted to participants, completed, and submitted online or via text. The exit research interview addresses the participants' satisfaction with the church after thirteen weeks and confirms their readiness for membership.

The Problem

This research project started on April 2, 2023, and ended on September 24, 2023. GWC lacked a theoretical system that turned first-time guests into returning guests and took returning guests through a spiritual process from attendees to committed church members. Additionally, the church had no prearranged or predetermined strategic structure to take people from knowing

² Searcy, Nelson, Fusion, *Turning first-time guests into fully engaged members of your church*, 111.

Christ to growing in Christ, and the church had failed to establish and codify a discipleship-making methodology that was easily implementable. The church did not intentionally engage first-time and returning guests in ways that made them belong. This DMIN action research project aimed to develop and initiate a strategy with biblical steps designed to help attendees become committed church members.

The Purpose

This research project was intentional in its efforts to create engaging and welcoming environments where first-time guests would be eager to return. Participants in this research went through a process called assimilation. The church used a systems approach to make insiders of outsiders in the church's faith community. Therefore, the church used a congregational system that is theologically based and strategically designed for practicality. Furthermore, this action research made the case that when the church created strategic steps with fundamental biblical praxis, first-time guests became returning guests, and returning guests became regular guests. Most regular guests became committed church members.

Congregational Systems

The church's theoretical system and methodology are built on the foundation of Scripture and achieving new sustainable growth. Six critical systems are working each week: weekend service, biblical hospitality, assimilation, small groups, volunteerism, and stewardship. McIntosh and Stevenson insist that any attempt the church makes to disciple must eventually be developed into an organized structure.³ Paul understood God's affinity for systems when he wrote, "Just as

³McIntosh and Stevenson, *Building the Body*, 175.

each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function” (Rom 12:4, NIV).

These systems are prearranged for a specific outcome and can be evaluated immediately. The church applied biblical hospitality on every level of engagement with attendees and church members. Biblical hospitality represents the foundation upon which assimilation is built. Greeters meet participants, guests, and members at the door with a welcoming smile and attitude each week. This principle was taught and modeled by leadership. The church's café is where guests and members converge weekly for refreshments. The research facility is designed with a café just beyond the main auditorium and near the restrooms. The bright lights, smell of coffee, free breakfast snacks, and conversations innately lure first-time guests into the space with curiosity. The researcher, elders, and board of deacons coalesce around the café to create an opportunity for fellowship. Small groups, volunteer ministry, and short-term missional outreach are the foundation for the GWC assimilation system. Linked with the weekend service system, the church intuitively takes guests from attendees to members. Searcy believes a system is an ongoing process that saves stress, time, energy, and money.⁴

The systems of the church are relationship-driven by a dedicated team. Initially, the church lacked a congregational system and was in decline. The strategy was church revitalization with a congregational system designed from this action research. See figure 9 for data collected during the research period that tracked church attendance for six months. Weekly follow-ups and congregational care helped the church to reach a sustainable church.

⁴ Searcy, Nelson, *Fusion*, 32.

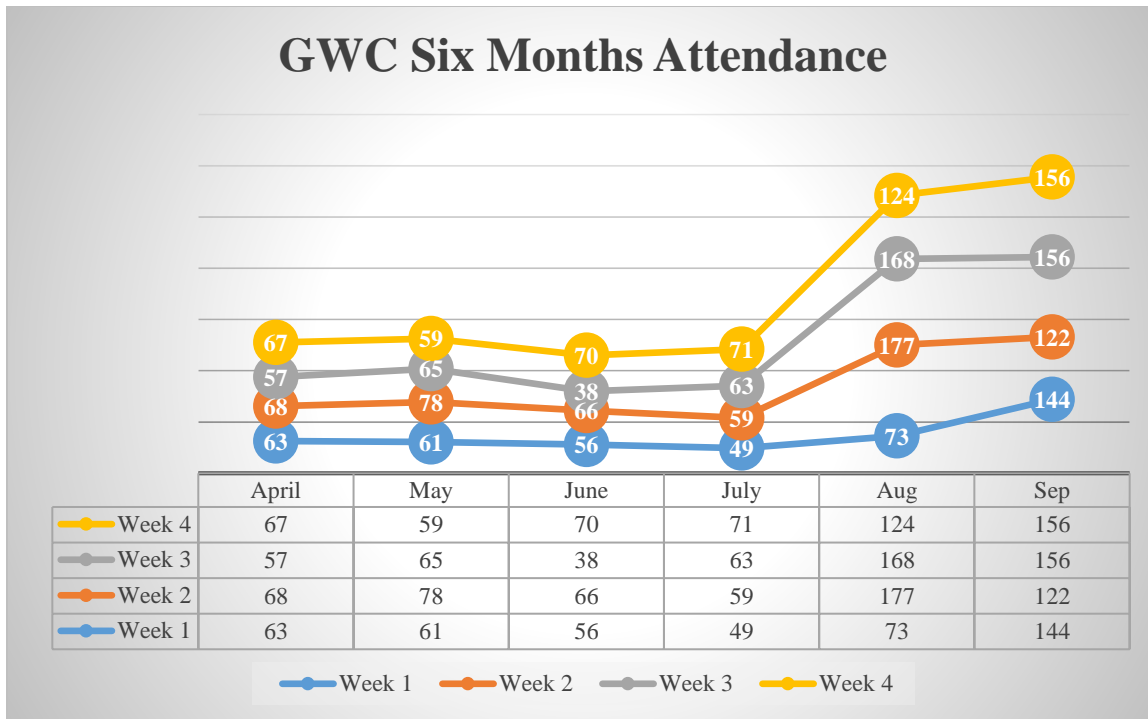
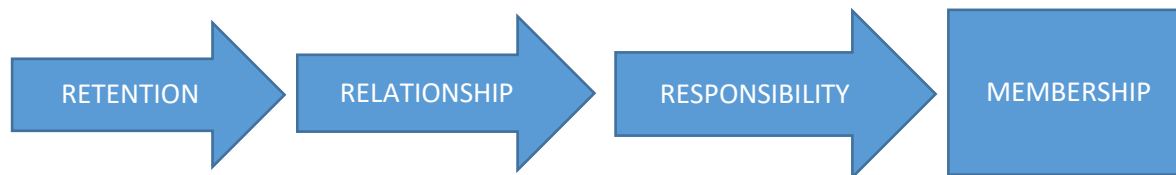


Figure 9. Six months of church attendance during the action research.

The spike in attendance for GWC was the result of relocating to a new facility a few miles away. The sustained growth was the result of the new congregational system that welcomed newcomers to church and retained them with an effective follow-up that led to a deeper relationship with the church and Christ.

Collective Results

This section includes the participants' list, age, gender, and relative details for the research. Results are listed with each phase of the study:



Results from the Retention Phase

Retention is the goal in the first phase for newcomers to the church. Each phase is critical and builds on the next. Retention is predictable when the church knows the demographic of its community and prepares for first-time guests. The table below lists the number of participants in the research study and the relevant demographic.

Table 1.2. About Participants.

| PARTICIPANTS | AGE | GENDER | CHILDREN | LOCALITY |
|----------------|-------------|--------|----------|----------------|
| Participant MH | Thirty | Female | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant BN | Thirty-Six | Female | YES | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant EP | Forty-Nine | Female | YES | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant VB | Fifty-Two | Female | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant CD | Fifty-Four | Male | YES | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant BC | Sixty-Four | Female | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant HG | Sixty-Four | Male | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant JC | Sixty-Seven | Male | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant VP | Sixty-Seven | Female | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |
| Participant BG | Seventy | Female | NO | 5 MILES RADIUS |

Participants are of various ages, with most of them female. This study was concerned about whether participants had small and school-age children. Parents of small and school-age children would most likely consider a church with a nursery and core programs for their children over one that does not. Coincidentally, all the participants lived in the communities surrounding the church.

The first research questionnaire is given to participants shortly after consent. The purpose is to determine participants' satisfaction with the church. For example, the condition of the church grounds, convenient parking, and the overall facility's condition are essential in this phase. GWC believes that the initial attraction for guests in the weekend service is how they are greeted at the door, treated as guests, and directed and seated in the service.

The table below shows participants' overall satisfaction based on their answers to five questions. For example, the researcher was interested in knowing how participants heard about the church and what first attracted them to the church. When a participant receives the questionnaire, they will have attended a service at least three times over six weeks. This timeframe is critical to answer two questions in the survey: Has your opinion changed; do you feel welcome?

Table 1.3. Answers from First Questionnaire.

| PARTICIPANTS | How did you hear about the church? | What first attracted you to the church? | Has your opinion changed? | Do you feel welcome? | Rate the overall church service. |
|----------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Participant MH | Member | Songs/Sermon Atmosphere/Preference | NO | YES | Good |
| Participant BN | Drive-By | Songs/Sermon Close to Home | NO | YES | Good |
| Participant EP | Member | Songs/Sermon/Family | NO | YES | Excellent |
| Participant VB | Member | Songs/Sermon/Family | NO | YES | Good |
| Participant CD | An Invite | Songs/Sermon/Atmosphere Friends | NO | YES | Excellent |
| Participant BC | An Invite | Songs/Sermon/Family Activities | NO | YES | Excellent |
| Participant HG | Friend | Songs/Sermon/Friend Activities | NO | YES | Good |
| Participant JC | An Invite | Songs/Sermon/Activities | NO | YES | Excellent |

| | | | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-------------------------------------|----|-----|-----------|
| Participant VP | An Invite | Songs/Sermon/Preference | NO | YES | Good |
| Participant BG | Member | Songs/Sermon/Small Group Connection | NO | YES | Excellent |

Results from the Relationship Phase

The relationship phase is vital to assimilation at GWC. Regular guests should have attended a service six times between the ninth and the twelfth week. At this point, they are encouraged to join a small group connection or participate in volunteer ministry. The aim is to help regular guests feel like they belong by making essential relationship connections.

Community is vital in the church's ethos; this phase was necessary to achieve the next one. The table below shows active ministries in the church and connections by participants.

Table 1.4. Participants and Volunteer Ministry.

| Participants | MH | BN | CD | EP | VB | BC | HG | JC | VP | BG |
|----------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Bible-Fellowship | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Children Ministry | X | X | | | | | | | | |
| Greeters Ministry | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Hospitality Ministry | | | | | | X | | | X | |
| Men Ministry | | | | | | | X | X | | |
| Music Ministry | | | | X | X | | | X | | |
| Student Ministry | | | | | | | | | | |
| Outreach Ministry | | | | | | | X | | | |
| Women Ministry | X | X | X | | X | | | | X | X |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|--|--|--|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| Ushers Ministry | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Dance Ministry | | | | X | | | | | | |
| Youth Ministry | | | | | | X | | X | | |

Table 5 highlights that all participants in this research were successfully engaged at various degrees in volunteer ministry. Volunteer ministry is the engine that drives the local church. This research uses volunteer ministry to connect regular guests with members and others in the church for the community. Admittedly, GWC has limited offerings in volunteer ministry and targeted small groups. Nevertheless, this limitation had no perceived impact on church growth, and relative to the size of the church, the offering appears to be in an acceptable range.

Results from the Responsibility Phase

In the responsibility phase, the researcher evaluates the data collected to determine whether participants are ready to join the church. By this time, the participants should have attended a weekend service or small group connection long enough to feel like they belong to the church. During this phase, participants sit down with the researcher in an interview. The interview is conducted near the end of the research study. Most churchgoers are at different levels of spiritual development and readiness for responsibility. The interview questionnaire assesses whether a participant is ready for membership in the church. Table 6 shows some of the most essential questions in the interview for the researcher and answers given by participants. The goal of the interview is to determine if participants still feel welcomed and connected to the church body.

Table 1.5. Participants Answer from Interview.

| PARTICIPANTS | Do you still feel welcome? | Have you made friends/acquaintances since you started attending? | Do you feel like you belong here? | How do you feel about contributing financially to the church? | How do you feel about church membership? |
|----------------|----------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Participant MH | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | Relocated |
| Participant BN | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | Not Ready |
| Participant EP | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |
| Participant VB | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |
| Participant CD | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |
| Participant BC | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |
| Participant HG | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | Considering It |
| Participant JC | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |
| Participant VP | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |
| Participant BG | Yes | Yes | Yes | Good | I am a Member |

The results from the interview confirmed what was observed by the researcher in this project. Seventy percent of participants became members before the end of the research. All the participants made friends or acquaintances and felt the welcoming spirit of the church. The takeaway from the interview is that the church has community and fellowship.

Each participant felt good about the stewardship system in the church, although not every participant gave regularly. Therefore, this phase determines their readiness and commitment for tasks and roles in the church and for membership. Table 1.6 shows the relationship between participants' activity in the church and their desire for membership. Once again, a correlation was observed between solid relationships in the church and firm commitments. For example, the

underpinnings of volunteer ministry are assimilation, and the researcher kept all ministries in the church relationship intensive.

Table 1.6. Involvement in Volunteer Ministry and Interest in Membership.

| Participants | MH | BN | EP | CD | VB | BC | HG | JC | VP | BG |
|--------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Small Group | | | | X | | | X | | | X |
| Volunteer Ministry | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | X | X |
| Giving | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Membership | | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X |

The pie chart in figure 10 breaks down the participants into four categories: Considering Membership, Drop Out, Not Ready, and Membership. This study suggests that participants considered members needing more time to transition. Comparatively, these participants' activity in the church was on par with those who became members then.

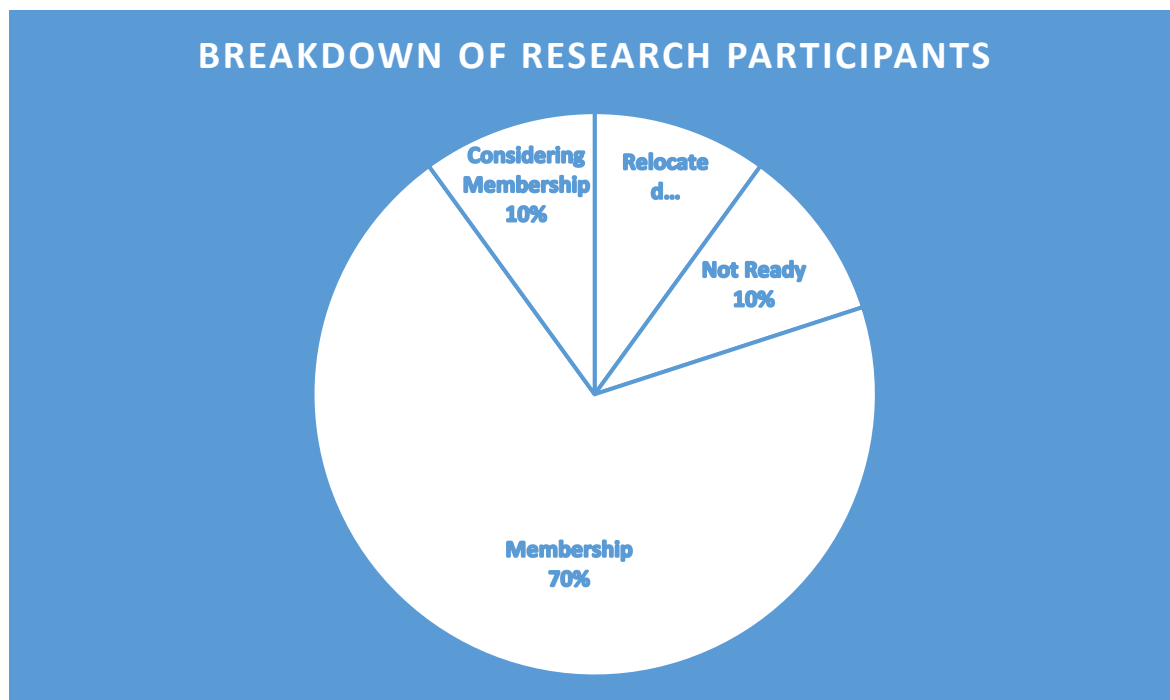


Figure 10. Breakdown of research participants.

One participant relocated to Florida toward the end of the research. Objectively, this participant probably would have transitioned in time because of their strong relationships in the church. This participant is college and career-age and eager to serve.

Objectively, the researcher does not consider two participants ready for membership. Their activity level in the church is on par with other participants seeking membership. These participants do not seem interested in making the transition. Nevertheless, research indicates, given time, there is a good chance they will move from attender to member of the church.

Most of the participants in this action research journeyed from attendee to church member. Statically, 70 percent of the participants were assimilated into the community. As previously stated, the unpredictability of the week-to-week attendance of participants made it necessary to adjust the timeline of success for both the retention and relationship phases. The

shift is subtle and authentic even when guests' interest is piqued and efforts are made to engage.⁵ This reality made extending the timeline by six months necessary for assimilation from attender to member. Participants were not rushed or controlled in the action research, which would have skewed the data collected.

Data Analysis

Participants in this action research were more inclined toward serving in core ministries in the church rather than small group connections. Nevertheless, small group ministry met the relational aspect necessary for the shift to the responsibility phase of the project. The collection methodology used was effective and flawed. Connection cards were effective as the primary method of collecting data. The researcher used them for the first level of data collection, and they are widely used and available throughout the church. They are located conveniently in the back of seats with a pen for guests to use. The researcher or facilitator instructs first-time and returning guests from the podium on completing the cards and turning them in.

Guests and members alike used them for the expressed purpose, which resulted in the researcher's ability to engage participants in volunteer ministry and small group connection. Additionally, small groups and volunteer facilitators, church staff, and the researcher were necessary to interpret the data and make observations for clarification and analysis.

The data collected told the researcher the participants' names, contact numbers, ages, and demographics. It was collected in three ways: by ushers at the offering time in the service, by drop boxes conveniently located near the entrance to the main auditorium, and directly by the researcher.

⁵ Searcy and Fusion, 111.

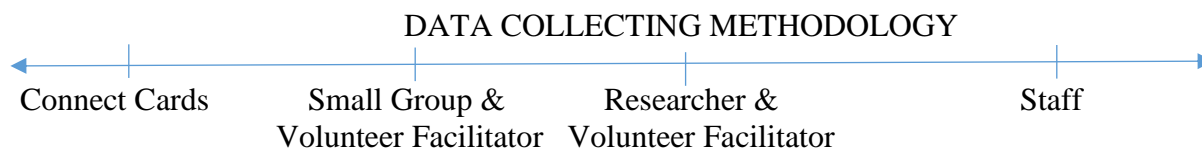


Figure 11. Data Collecting Methodology.

The method needs to be revised because volunteer members were careless at times with collection and occasional misplacing of the cards, which resulted in delays in reaching the researcher and the follow-up. Participants were constantly reminded to fill them out, and ushers needed to be reminded of the importance of collecting them. The regular use of connection cards requires an organized filing system and location for storage. Depending on the size of the church, a weekly collection of connection cards can be cumbersome. The church has not sorted out an alternative method. Using connection cards as the first level of data collection will continue in the retention phase of the assimilation process.

Participant's Follow Up

A team of trained volunteers was used to track participants' attendance and church-related activities in this action research. The goal was to follow up with participants within twenty-four to thirty-six hours of their visit and approximately five consecutive times following their initial visit to the church. The follow-up needed to be more consistent with the stated goals. Volunteers did not always make them a priority.

Initially, a text message is the preferred method of follow-up. Emails were optional but were used alternatively if texting was not possible. The researcher never had a reason to write to first-time or returning guests in this study. The researcher made phone calls to returning guests at

least three times. A brief phone call is made to returning guests after their third visit. The phone call aims to help guests enter the relationship phase of assimilation. The scripted text or email message will include a thank you for coming, gain feedback about the experience and invite them back for another visit. When guests visit for a third time, they are returning guests and potential participants in this research study.

The researcher tracked the attendance of GWC guests on their return to the church. Guests who return to GWC at least three times in six weeks are designated regular guests and potential participants. Regular guests are primarily asked verbally to consent to the action research study. The church had written consent forms alternatively. Most participants in this study are emailed a brief questionnaire to complete online and submit. However, some participants will receive a take-home questionnaire to complete and return at next weekend's service. The questionnaire is a survey to help the researcher gauge the level of interest and satisfaction of newcomers about the church on their recent visits.

Summary of Results

Ten participants in the research project were of various ages, genders, and parental responsibilities. All the participants live within a five-mile radius of the church, and all except one are still connected to the church and involved in volunteer ministry. Some participants were ready for the responsibility of membership, while others were not. A participant's attendance and giving were too sporadic to be considered a candidate for membership in the church and were not firm enough for responsibility in the church. Another participant relocated at the end of the research but never crossed the line of generosity to give an offering to any of GWC programs when given the opportunity. Nevertheless, each one was

willing to sign up and volunteer for outreach or serve in a ministry area in the church when asked, and everyone felt like they belonged.

Phase three was essential to membership at GWC and vital to volunteer ministry. Regular guests made the shift from relationship to responsibility and volunteered when asked. For instance, two participants can still easily make the shift to membership. They serve and give regularly. Nevertheless, they are not ready to commit. This action research focuses on creating the conditions for first-time guests to become returning guests and for returning guests to become members. This study does not explain why regular guests are hesitant or not interested in becoming members after meeting the responsibility condition.

Nevertheless, the results show that most participants were ready for membership, and half of them requested it before the end of the research. Additionally, the data show that all participants wanted to be involved and belong, even if some of them, for undisclosed reasons, were not ready for membership in the church. Their answer during the final interview suggests that given more time and nurture, the remaining two participants can grow in their commitment and spiritual maturity for membership. Additionally, the research indicates the importance of relationships in the shift from attender to member. Every level of engagement during the action research was relational and a vital part of assimilation.

According to the data from this research, retention, relationship, and responsibility are the journey from attender to member of the church. The approach may vary from one church to another. However, the principles should remain the same. The responsibility phase prepared participants for the possibility of membership, which required a commitment to support the church's mission. Additionally, the stewardship system became more relevant in the

responsibility phase. One of the responsibilities of membership is a commitment to financially support the church.

In the responsibility phase of the research project, participants had attended a weekend service or small group connection long enough to be assimilated into the community. During this phase, participants had the researcher's sit-down or digital interview questionnaire. The interview was conducted near the end of the research study, giving participants ample time for assimilation through tasks and roles. The interview accomplished three purposes: it allowed the researcher to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the congregation system, obtain relevant information to improve the process of assimilation, and assess whether participants were ready for the responsibility of membership.

The implementation of Gateway Church's congregational system demonstrated the importance of community in the church. Jesus said that the world will know His followers by how they treat one another (John 13:35, NIV). The practice of biblical hospitality is the most talked about aspect of newcomers to the church. There are fewer comments about any other system or opinions about the facility, grounds, and ministry accommodations. The adage, first impressions are lasting impressions, is the truth that American churches must contend with today.

Churches can no longer assume newcomers will make friends on their own or discover what it means to be a community without the loving assistance of dedicated volunteers. Additionally, this action research shows the importance of gaining knowledge and insight about newcomers to the church. Effective follow-up begins with basic knowledge about guests to the church, including contact information. Having a way to collect this information without newcomers feeling uncomfortable or suspicious is an art. Nevertheless, it is necessary to

establish a new relationship, and it is crucial to gain insight into what the impression of the church is from newcomers. Their opinion is unbiased and objective. Additionally, entering a relationship with the church should include making them feel like they belong. The three phases implemented by the church were designed to get to know guests and create a community where they feel safe and loved while introducing them to Christ and helping them find new life in Him.

The survey and interview are typical for research. GWC assumed that some of the concerns for visitors are a safe and clean environment, adequate parking, attractive buildings, and landscaping. Participants were given an informal take-home survey designed to learn whether the church is out of step with the current realities their visitors represent. Therefore, the congregational system was built around guests and members alike.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Taking a first-time guest from attender to member is both an evangelistic and discipleship proposition. Although this research project does not focus on these two church growth principles, it should not be assumed that a healthy growing church could exist without them. For example, Gateway Church sponsored numerous outreaches to reach first-time guests and used strategic promotions and advertising to attract participants for this action research.

Additionally, the great commission and making disciples are always central to the church's ethos. Therefore, the biblical step for first-time and returning guests is transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ. A congregation system that lacks these spiritual elements would compromise the gospel and exist in scriptural error.

The premise of this action research postulated that GWC desires to make insiders out of outsiders with an intentional ethos. This ethos would include an intentional strategy to produce committed followers of Christ because the church could develop processes that systematically engage participants at each level of their spiritual progress in Christ. Additionally, these systematic processes would take first-time and returning guests on a spiritual journey from attendee to a church member. This chapter comprises four sections: Research Implications, Research Applications, Research Limitations, and Further Research.

Research Implications

Similar churches can have predictable growth by initiating an intentional strategy with biblical principles designed to help visitors connect, belong, and grow in the likeness of Jesus

Christ. Intentionality demands the preparation of the church to meet guests. In other words, the condition of the facility and the appearance of the grounds make a lingering first impression on guests. Therefore, a Pre-Visit strategy to meet or exceed the expectations of first-time guests prepares the church to impress them enough to return.

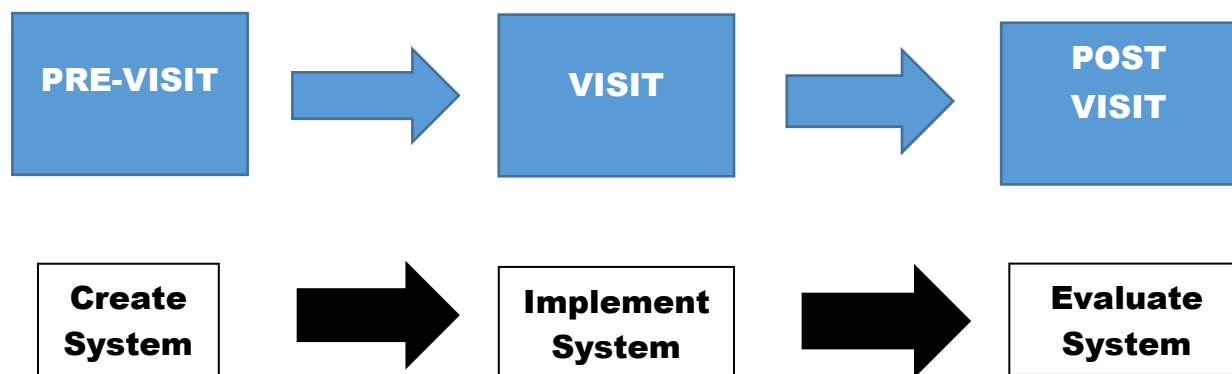


Figure 12. Overview of visitor's strategy and accompanying church system.

Nevertheless, some regular guests will shift from relationship to responsibility and will not be ready for membership in the church, but this posture can change with enough time, nurturing, and spiritual development. Visitors to the church do not always disclose their level of interest in a relationship with Jesus Christ or why they return after the first visit. Research shows that unchurched people do not usually make quantum shifts from outsiders to insiders in the church within a few months, regardless of their experience in the community. Searcy writes, "Many first-time guests are dragged to church by someone else. When they decide to return, it is usually out of their own volition."¹ This action research demonstrated that having strategic steps to greet, treat, direct, and seat visitors to the church will exponentially increase the chances of their return.

¹ Searcy and Nelson, *Fusion*, 111.

Thesis Statement

American churches are in decline and urgently need revitalization. Church attendance in 2021 dropped below 50 percent in Gallup's poll eight-decade trend for the first time. In 2020, 47 percent of Americans said they belonged to houses of worship. This number is down 3 percent from 2018 and 23 percent from 1999.² The need for revitalization cannot be overstated, and American churches need to be constant with their plight without a congregational system that is measurable and implementable. The thesis of this action research is, If Gateway Church creates strategic steps with fundamental biblical praxis, then the church will help first-time and returning guests transition from attenders to committed church members. The basis of this argument is founded on the knowledge that Christian maturity necessitates a process with strategic biblical principles of discipleship that cause new Christians to grow to maturity in the knowledge of God and Christ. The church initially lacked the congregational system to retain first-time and returning guests.

As a result, the church suffered from membership dropouts and ineffective follow-up. Gateway Church was the research location. The research started in a rented space that was not conducive to the Pre-Visitor strategy of the study. The church was completing a new facility designed and located to accommodate the action research. The new location was designed and structured for a fully implementable congregational system. The system depended on three vital things: a discipleship mechanism, a process of assimilation, and a strategic step toward membership in the local church. The church system used by GWC was created, implemented, and evaluated to determine whether it accomplished the previously mentioned goals.

Implementing most of the research in the new location immediately brought sustainable

² Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time."

growth. The treatment of guests and effective follow-up confirmed that church growth necessitates a predetermined process that meets or exceeds the expectations of visitors. GWC has grown over 200 percent from the start of this action research.

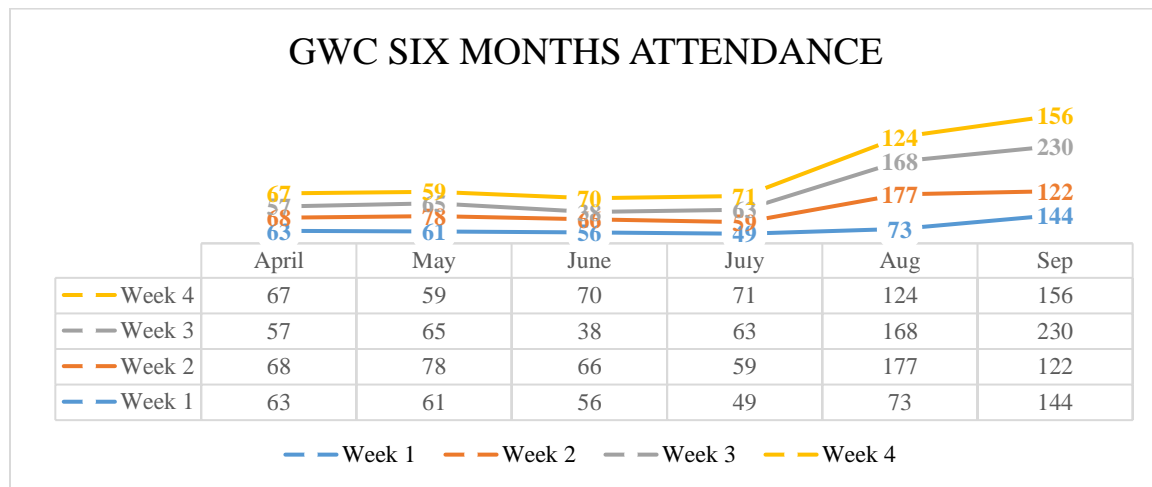


Figure 13. GWC Six months attendance.

Figure 13 reflects the spike in growth after the church relocated to a new facility a few miles away. The new location opened a new pipeline to newcomers and gave them the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the church's congregational system. Additionally, forty people got saved in the weekend services, and fifteen were baptized in water during this action research. These results speak directly to the relevance and efficacy of this study. The goal of this research was to take first-time guests at GWC from attendees to committed members in approximately six months, depending on their level of engagement. The implementation of this research study happened in three phases: Retention, Relationship, and Responsibility, as shown in figure 14.

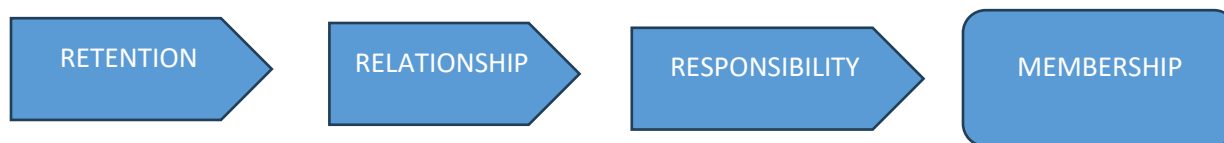


Figure 14. The three phases of the GWC congregational system.

Each phase has strategic steps that need trained volunteers to implement them. In the retention phase, greeters, ushers, a dedicated hospitality team, and an effective follow-up team are indispensable to its success. In the relationship phase, small groups, short-term missions, and volunteer ministry are key matrices for assimilation. The success of the responsibility phase depends on the success of the relationship phase for visitors to the church. In this phase, the greater the number of relationship connections correlates to a stronger commitment to tasks and roles in the church. The responsibility phase prepares guests for the possibility of membership.

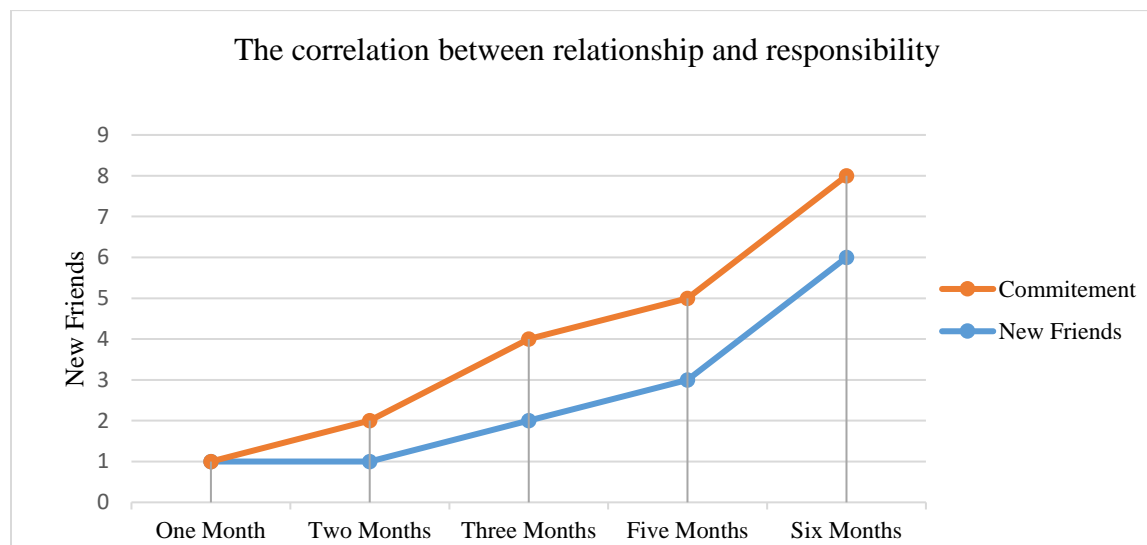


Figure 15. Church growth ratio.

Figure 15 reflects the beliefs of Chip Arn in his book called *Church Growth Ratio Book*, that every new member should have developed a minimum of seven friendships within the first

six months after joining the church.³ The correlation between relationship and firm commitment is inferred from the inevitability of members dropping out of church after six months.

Research Applications

Similar churches in size and scope could have predictable growth by initiating an intentional strategy with biblical principles designed to help visitors to the church connect, belong, and grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ. The steps in this research project will vary from one congregation to another. The principle learned in this study affirms past studies that suggest the church can experience predictable growth with biblical principles and strategic steps that remain the same. For example, the project took longer than anticipated, and there were unexpected delays, but the biblical principles and strategic steps remained the same. The results of this action research were comparable to the expected results postulated by noticeable authors and scholars discussed in the theoretical foundation of this research.

The contention here is that this research can be replicated in a similar situation for churches of different sizes and scopes. For example, the pandemic caused an immediate shift economically, relationally, spiritually, and practically in the church. Many African Americans in the church felt vulnerable to COVID-19 and discontinued attending church out of fear for their health and safety. Leadership was suddenly addressing an abrupt decline in attendance caused by fear of the virus. Attendance fell by about 60 percent within a few months to an average of sixty in the weekend service, and the church discontinued multiple services on Sundays. The pandemic forced delays in constructing the new church facility, and the current building plans were modified to reflect the modest changes.

³ Gainsbrugh, *Winning the Backdoor War*, 130.

The researcher started the implementation of this research post-pandemic. Prearranged and predetermined structures called, systems, were created with intentional application and strategy to take people through the process of knowing Christ, growing in Christ, serving in Christ, and sharing Him in the community. The church accomplished this process by designing a system around the three phases discussed in this research: retention, relationship, and responsibility, but the weekend service remains the most significant opportunity to implement the system and for people to hear and respond to the gospel.

Research Limitations

Initial changes to the intervention design resulted from the unpredictability of participants in this research and the limitation of the church. For example, age, maturity, environment, and church attendance affect the length of time for assimilation. A healthy congregational system can take regular guests through the process of membership. However, the responsibility phase involves the church and the guests. The church is limited to what is known about its guests to church. Newcomers frequently select not to disclose personal information about themselves or their lifestyle situations, and unchurched people do not usually make quantum shifts from outsiders to insiders in the church within a few months, regardless of their experience in the community.

Therefore, a data collection methodology is needed to acquire important information about visitors to the church. The method will not need to be perfect, but it needs to be an effective way to get personal information about visitors to the church. The researcher used specially designed visitor cards that GWC called, Connection Cards. They represented the first level of data collection and were widely used and available throughout the church. They were located conveniently in the back of seats with a pen for guests to use. See figures 5 and 6 for a

copy of the connection card. They requested important information like name, address, best contact number, and occupation. The information obtained helped the church engage in conversation. The researcher or facilitator instructs first-time and returning guests from the podium to complete and turn in the cards.

The scope of the research study was limited by resources and, for a time, by location. Relocating was determined to be the best option for GWC in revitalization and future growth. If the church had remained in its previous location for the duration of the research, the results would have been different, regardless of the new congregation system. In addition, limited resources are weighted on the church's advertising budget and ability to hire competent staff. The church spent an estimated \$20,000 advertising its new location on a billboard, Facebook, postcard mailings, and radio broadcasting.

This expenditure was a massive step of faith for a church GWC's size. It was perceived to be necessary to attract the community to their location and test the thesis in this research. Some churches will have larger budgets and make a more considerable impact in attracting attention to their church. Others will have a smaller budget and limited community impact. Additionally, the church is limited by the size of its volunteer ministry teams designated exclusively to first-time guests and returning guests. Nevertheless, churches can successfully retain visitors, assimilate them, and help them belong with prearranged strategic steps with biblical praxis.

Further Research

The focus of this research was on first-time guests in general at the church. The participants were Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X was born between 1965 and 1980. Millennials are born

between 1981 and 1996. Only one participant was a millennial. There were no Generation Z in the project, nor did any join the church during the research period. Generation Z are born between 1997 and 2012. The rapid rise in biblical apathy among Christians resembles the steady decline in church attendance subsequent to the shift from a biblical to a secular or non-biblical worldview. Glenn S. Sunshine argues, "Fundamental to a person's belief system is their presuppositions or worldviews about life; that is, what it means to be human, which presupposes certain core beliefs about God, the world, truth, and morality."⁴

The shift in worldview is attributable to the overall decline among churchgoers. Polling over the last decade indicates that people's views have changed. According to the Barna Group, "Half of all adults now contend that Christianity is just one of many options Americans choose."⁵ Moreover, postmodernists identify themselves with no religious affiliation at all. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, insists that postmodernism is "the belief that everything can be explained objectively through the scientific method—postmodernism advances the idea that there is no such thing as objectivity."⁶

⁴ Glenn S. Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 14, 15.

⁵ The Barna Research Group, "Christianity Is No Longer Americans, Default Faith," (January 2009): Accessed <https://www.barna.com/research/christianity-is-no-longer-Americans-default-faith>.

⁶ Kinnaman, David, "Competing Worldviews Influences Today's Christians," (May 2017): Accessed May 18, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/competing-worldviews-influence-today-Christians>.

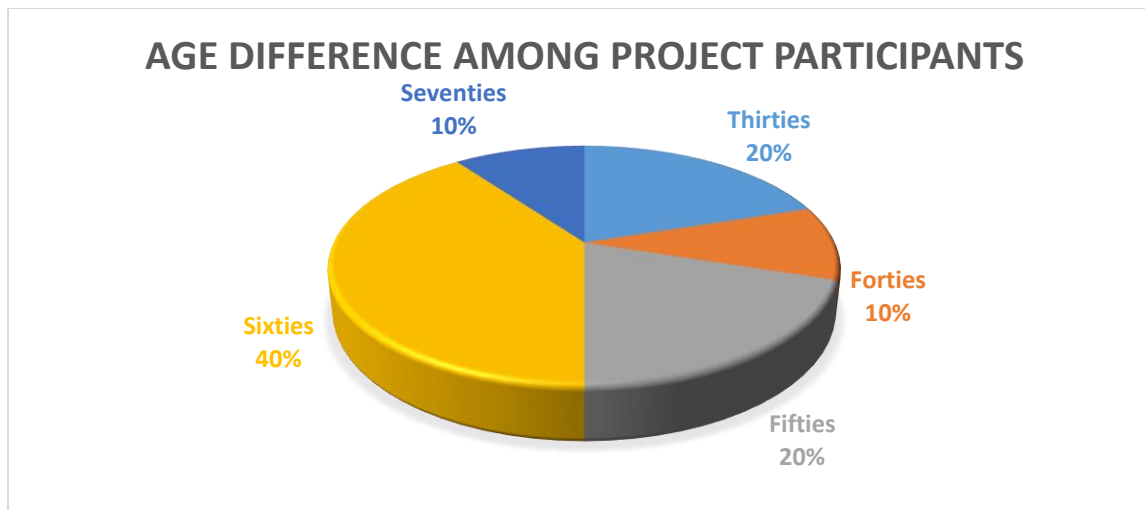


Figure 16. Age difference among participants.

The shift in ideologies and worldviews highlights the urgent need for the church to address these trends biblically, practically, and systematically. James Emery White wrote in his book, *The Rise of the Nones*, “The ARIS survey found that the *Nones* nearly doubled from 1990 to 2008, making those who claimed no religion at all the third largest defined constituent in the U.S.”⁷ White’s insightful book explains that there is a new generation of religiously unaffiliated people who are disassociating themselves from organized religion. Ryan Burge, the author of *The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* argues that the religious disaffiliation has risen in every generation, including even old Americans, though the sharpest spike in nones is occurring with millennials.⁸

⁷ James E. White, *The Rise of the Nones; Understanding and Reaching The Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 13.

⁸ Jana Reiss, The Barna Group: (March 24, 2021) [The 'nones' are growing and growing more diverse \(religionnews.com\)](http://religionnews.com).

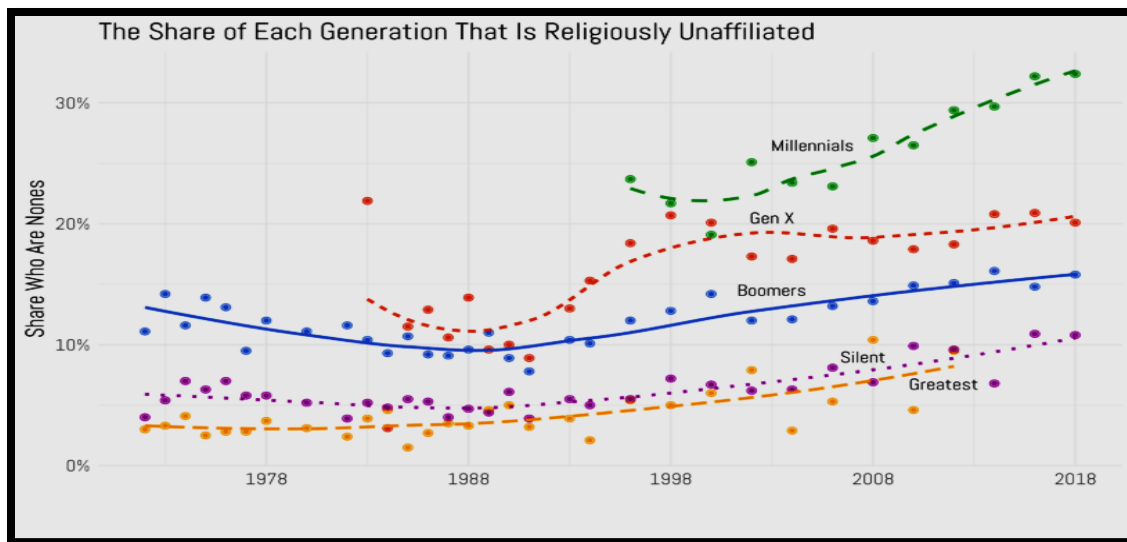


Figure 17. Percentage of Americans claiming no religious identity.

Burges argues that the retention of the nones was poor in the beginning, with only about 33 percent growing up with no religion staying disaffiliated as adults. Today, that number has risen by nearly 30 points. “Nearly two-thirds of people who are raised as nones are still nones in adulthood.”⁹

Future research is needed to understand and reach the growing number of religiously unaffiliated in the United States. Many of them, according to White, are young liberal-to-moderate Westerners. This new generation of religiously unaffiliated is labeled postmodern. The term postmodern is a label to explain the shift from modernism. Studies about these shifts are familiar; the rate of shift in recent years is new. The alarming shift is largely unnoticed in the local church. The book *On the Verge* by Alan Hirsh and Dave Ferguson addresses how the local church can start an apostolic movement. Hirsh wrote, “My own sense of calling is to somehow

⁹ Jana Reiss, The Barna Group: (March 24, 2021) [The 'nones' are growing and growing more diverse \(religionnews.com\)](https://www.religionnews.com).

call the church to recover her original, and originative apostolic ways and to become a high impact Jesus movement again in the west.”¹⁰

Finally, the problem for the American church continues to be the lack of a theoretical system to guide newcomers, from attendees to members, through the process. They will continue needing to build new systems and destroy obsolete ones to reach a new generation of unchurched people. There is no foundation of the Christian faith other than Christ and Him crucified! American churches will need to build on the foundation of Christ with a proclamation and expositional preaching on the revelation of Jesus Christ, but the problem with turning attendees into committed members of the church will persist.

¹⁰ Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A journey into the apostolic future of the church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 23.

APPENDIX A
VERBAL RECRUITMENT STATEMENT

Hello [Potential Participant],

As a student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand how Gateway Church can help church attenders become fully committed members of the church. This research study is part of the requirements for a Doctorate Degree.

The purpose of my research is to discover a congregational system that consists of practical steps with biblical principles to help first-time and returning guests to Gateway Church want to participate in the life of the church and pursue church membership. If you meet the participant criteria, and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants in this research study must be at least 18 years of age, not currently a member of another church, and live in the surrounding area. Participants, if willing, will be asked to fill out a connection card. Additionally, they will be asked to only sign and date subsequent connection cards on their return visit to the church over the next eight weeks. The connection card will be placed in the offering bag or given to an usher. Next, you will be asked to complete a take-home questionnaire, and return it to the church. Furthermore, you will be asked to participate in a set-down interview with the researcher toward the end of the project.

The questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and the set-down interview will take about 30 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be collected as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate in this research study? [Yes] Great, you can begin by filling out a connection card and turn it in; we will follow up with you about the next steps. [No] I understand. Thank you for your time.

You will be asked to sign a consent document at the time of the questionnaire. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Do you have any questions?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX B
LETTER OF CONSENT
Consent

Title of the Project: From Attender to Church Member

Principal Investigator: Loyd Johnson, Lead pastor, Gateway Church

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate in this research study, you must be at least 18 years of age, not currently a member of another church, and live in the surrounding area. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to better understand how Gateway church can help attenders become involved in the church and consider membership. This study will determine what strategic steps are necessary to help first-time guest to Gateway church become committed members of the church

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Sign a consent form to participate in the research study.
2. Completely fill out a church connection card as a first-time guest; sign and date subsequent connections card [only] with your next visit to the church for a period of eight weeks.
3. Place each completed connection card in the offering bag or hand-off to an usher.
4. Fill out a brief take-home questionnaire after an eight-week visit to the church.
5. Consider the participation in a small group, or volunteer ministry at the church.
6. Finally, agree to a set-down, 30-minute, interview toward the end of the project.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The benefit of participation in this study is the development of a congregational system that includes strategic steps with biblical praxis to help first-time guests become excited returning guests, and help returning guests become committed members of the church.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and facilitators will have access to the records.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Gateway Church. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher or facilitator at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researchers conducting this study is Pastor Loyd Johnson. Feel free to contact him with any questions you may have. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [REDACTED], or by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Lucien Fortier, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

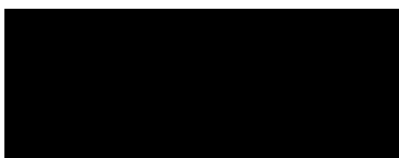
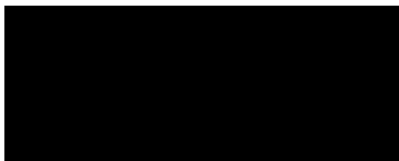
The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C**Request to conduct my action research study at Gateway Church**

September 3, 2022



RE: Permission to conduct my action research study at Gateway Church.

Dear Board of Directors,

As a doctoral student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of my requirement for a DMIN. The title of my research project is “From Attender to Church Member,” and the purpose of my research is to address the problem of Gateway Church inability to help first-time guest become returning guests, and from returning guest to membership.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my action research study at Gateway Church. This request includes recruiting participants for my research. The participants for my study will be limited to first-time and returning guest to Gateway Church. I am further requesting access to test data and records. Additionally, I am requesting to contact members and church staff to assist in this study.

Participants in this study during the research period will complete information cards called, “connection cards”. Additionally, they will fill out a questionnaire and agree to a sit-down interview toward the end of the research study. Furthermore, participants will get informed consent information prior to filling out questionnaires or a sit-down interview. Taking part in this study is voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue at any time. Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

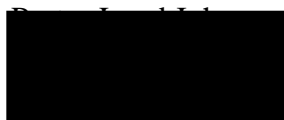
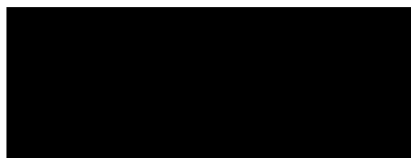
Sincerely,



Lead pastor, Gateway Church

APPENDIX D**Permission to conduct my action research study at Gateway Church**

September 3, 2022



Dear Rev. Johnson:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled “From Attender to Church Member, The board of directors of Gateway Church have decided to grant you permission to access our membership list/contact our faculty/staff/other and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- We grant permission for the Reverend Loyd Johnson to contact potential participants to invite them to participate in his research study.]
- The data requested **WILL NOT BE STRIPPED** of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher. Furthermore, we will provide our member list and he may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in his research study.
- The church board is requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,



Mark Hunter
Board Secretary, Gateway Church

APPENDIX E

VERBAL RECRUITMENT STATEMENT FOR FOLLOW-UP TEAM

Hello [Potential Follow-up Team Member],

As a student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand how Gateway church can help church attenders become fully committed members of the church. This research study is part of the requirements for a Doctorate Degree.

The purpose of my research is to discover a congregational system that consists of practical steps with biblical principles to help first-time and returning guests to Gateway Church want to participate in the life of the church and pursue church membership. The success of this research depends on at least five members in the church who are willing to help follow-up with newcomers and participants to the church. I would like to invite you to join the follow-up team.

Members of this team must be at least 18 years of age, and in good standing. Team members will be asked to contact newcomers to the church from connection cards received by the researcher. Follow up will be in three ways: A phone call, by text message, and email. The information on the connection card will remain confidential, and the cards will be returned after the follow-up is completed.

The research study will not exceed six months, and volunteers can opt out at any time. Participation is voluntary and there is no compensation. Training for this assignment will be brief and team members will receive a basic script to use during follow up, and it will be brief

Would you like to participate in this research study? [Yes] Great, a meeting will be scheduled with other team members to get acquainted and for instructions. [No] I understand. Thank you for your time.

Do you have any questions?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX F

Text Message Script for first-time thru fifth visit of newcomers to the church

| Script for text message Follow up | |
|--|---|
| First Visit | Hi (first name), this is (follow up team member) with Gateway church. Thank you for coming. I hope you had a good experience. I am inviting you back next Sunday for another visit. Once again, thanks for coming. |
| Second Visit | Hi (first name), this is (follow up team member) with Gateway church. Thank you for coming back for another visit. We are glad you came. I am inviting you back next Sunday for another visit. You won't be disappointed. |
| Third Visit | Hi (first name), this is (follow up team member) with Gateway church. It was great speaking with you today. I hope you can make it next week to meet our pastor and leadership team. |
| Fourth Visit | Hi (first name), this is (follow up team member) with Gateway church. It was great seeing you again. I hope the service was a blessing. Are you interested in knowing more about the church? Let me know. |
| Fifth Visit | Hi (first name), this is (follow up team member) with Gateway church. I would like to sign you up for a "First Serve" opportunity at the church. It's a great way to meet new people and help in a vital ministry. I will call you about it. What's the best time? |

APPENDIX G

Steps Used for Participants to Fill out Connection Cards at Church

| | |
|---------------|---|
| | First-time guests to GWC. |
| STEP 1 | All guests are asked to fill out a “Connection Card during the service” from the platform. |
| STEP 2 | The cards are collected by ushers during the offertory and compiled for the researcher. |
| STEP 3 | The researcher collects the cards after the service and records the data before giving them to the follow-up team. |
| STEP 4 | The follow-up team contacts guests within 36 hours of their visit. |
| | Guests are briefly asked about their experience and invited to another service or event. |
| STEP 5 | Follow-up team return connect cards to researcher. |

| | |
|---------------|---|
| | Second-time guests to GWC. |
| STEP 1 | Guests are asked to sign their name on “Connection Card during the service,” date it, and collected by ushers. |
| STEP 2 | The cards are collected by ushers during the offertory and compiled for the researcher. |
| STEP 3 | The researcher collects the cards after the service and records the data before giving them to the follow-up team. |
| STEP 4 | The follow-up team contacts guests within 36 hours of their visit. |
| | Guests are briefly asked about their experience and invited to another service or event. |
| STEP 5 | Follow-up team return connect cards to researcher. |

| Third-time guests to GWC. | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| STEP 1 | Guests are asked to sign their name on “Connection Card during the service,” date it, and collected by ushers. |
| STEP 2 | The cards are collected by ushers during the offertory and compiled for the researcher. |
| STEP 3 | The researcher collects the cards after the service and records the data before giving them to the follow-up team. |
| STEP 4 | The follow-up team contacts guests within 36 hours of their visit. Guests are briefly asked about their experience and invited to another service or event. |
| STEP 5 | Follow-up team return connect cards to researcher. |

| Fourth-time guests to GWC. | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| STEP 1 | Guests are asked to sign their name on “Connection Card during the service,” date it, and collected by ushers. |
| STEP 2 | The cards are collected by ushers during the offertory and compiled for the researcher. |
| STEP 3 | The researcher collects the cards after the service and records the data before giving them to the follow-up team. |
| STEP 4 | The follow-up team contacts guests within 36 hours of their visit. Guests are briefly asked about their experience and invited to another service or event. |
| STEP 5 | Follow-up team return connect cards to researcher. |

APPENDIX H**Life Group Signups****Table Signups**

| <u>CURRICULUM</u> | <u>FACILITATORS</u> |
|--|----------------------------|
| I. Cracking the communication Code: | (_____) |
| II. New Testament Challenge | (_____) |
| III. Independence Day | (_____) |
| IV. The Psalter Reclaim | (_____) |
| V. 90 Days Fitness Challenge | (_____) |
| VI. 42 Days to Financial Freedom | (_____) |
| VII. gods of War | (_____) |

APPENDIX I

Online Signup

Life Groups

“Where friendships are formed”

- Please check one:
- Men Life Group
- Women Life Group
- Senior Adult Life Group
- Married Couple Life Group
- Student Life Group

Dr.

Mr.

Mrs.

Ms.

Date:

Best Contact Number: _____

APPENDIX J

Small Group Publication (FRONT)

Our Next...

LIFE group



Where will we start a...

LIFE group

• We will start  at Church

• Then move to  other places to meet

Get Ready to join a...

LIFE group

What is a...

LIFE group

- It's the same as a small group
- Consist of 8-15 people
- Committed to fellowship
- Committed to growth
- Committed to God

What happens in a...

LIFE group

- Prayers happen in a Life Group
- Christ is modeled in a Life Group
- Everyone is known in a Life Group
- Absentees are noticed in a Life Group
- Discuss & share the bible in a Life Group

Who can join a...

LIFE group

Anyone willing to:

- Be Honest
- Be Genuine
- Be Together

Welcome to ...



Contact Info:

Loyd4him@bellsouth.net
Pat4him@bellsouth.net

706.701.8868

www.gatewaynow.org

APPENDIX K

Small Group Publication (BACK)

How long do we stay in a...

LIFE group

- Groups Are Asked to Stay Together for **SIX Weeks!**
- Then **Take One Month Off!**
- Then Choose Another Group for **Six Weeks!**

That is it!

Why join a...

LIFE group**L**ove God, Love People**I**nvestigate God's Word**F**ind Connections**E**ngage the Culture

Scriptural references for a...

LIFE group

Ex 18:13-23

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. ¹⁴When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" ¹⁵Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. ¹⁶Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

¹⁷Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. ¹⁹Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. ²⁰Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform.

NIV

²¹But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²²Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. ²³If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

NIV

Acts 20:20

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

Acts 5:42

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

NIV

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

NIV

Q & A about a...

LIFE group

- Will starting life groups be temporary?
NO
- Can someone leave a group early?
YES
- Will life groups be limited to members only?
NO
- Can life groups agree to meet at other times & places?
YES
- Will there be any rules for the group?
YES...to maintain accountability & responsibility
- Can I elect not to participate in a group?
YES
- Can someone other than members lead a group?
NO

APPENDIX L

Standard Hospitality Procedure (GREETERS)

| Preparing to Meet Guests | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| # 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrive 15 minutes ahead of schedule for prayer and instructions. • Dress approximately for your service area. • Make wearing a smile, your style! • Open entrance door for senior adults, mothers, children, and the disabled. • *Welcome members/Guests to the service with a “Script” statement. • Try to maintain a 36-inch clearance between you and newcomers. • Ensure that every guest gets a church program for the service. • Be ready to direct newcomers to the church to their destination. • Always remain vigilant at your post and report suspicious activity. • Remember, hospitality is Biblical! <p style="text-align: center;">Welcome Script:</p> |
| #2 | |
| #3 | |
| #4 | |
| #5 | |
| #6 | |
| #7 | |
| #8 | |
| #9 | |
| #10 | |
| #11 | |
| #1 | Good morning and welcome to Gateway Church; glad you’re here! |
| #2 | Good morning and thank you for coming to Gateway church! |
| #3 | Welcome, glad you’re here. |
| #4 | Welcome to Gateway church; glad you’re here. |
| #5 | Welcome to Gateway church; thank you for coming. |

APPENDIX M

Stewardship System at GWC

| Stewardship System | |
|---------------------------|---|
| # 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach three series on stewardship each year: Spring, Summer, and Fall. |
| #2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the importance of steward during offertory (Giving Script). |
| # 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make giving kiosk available for each service that givers to use. |
| # 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital giving with text to give options. |
| #5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital giving on GWC mobile app. |
| #6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online giving at [REDACTED] |
| #7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automated giving directly from checking acct., by givers. |
| #8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automated giving through the church with giver's permission. |
| #9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mail tithe/offering to GWC. |
| #10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send givers quarterly giving statements each year. |
| #11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send givers an annual giving letter each year. |
| #12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send a thank you letter to new givers at GWC. |
| #13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send a thank you letter to extravagant givers in the church. |
| #14 | |

APPENDIX N

Giving Script

In just a few minutes, we're going to receive an offering, and you're going to have the opportunity to give to something that's making an eternal difference in this community. Ushers go ahead and get ready for that.

Before we do that, I wanted to share a powerful verse with you. Deuteronomy 14:23 (TLB) says "The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to put God first in your lives."

WOW. It doesn't get much more straightforward than that. The tithe teaches me to put God first. I can't think of a more tangible and practical way in our lives to put God first than making a conscious choice with our money.

Right now the tithers are kicked back smiling and nodding, chilling, blessed, relaxed and the rest of you are going, "Crud. Holy cow. Wish we hadn't come today! Are you telling me 10%? Are you crazy? You have no idea!"

You might be going "Do you realize that's 10%? Do you know what that would take? I mean, we would have to rearrange everything! I would have to re-prioritize and make major changes to put God first! Is that what you are telling me?"

YES! THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'M TELLING YOU!

Through the local church you have the honor and opportunity to rearrange and re-prioritize your life around God through the tithe. The tithe teaches us to put God first.

When it comes to me giving to this church, I give because I have made the choice to center my entire life around Jesus - even my wallet. I'm honored to be able to join God in what He is doing here and I'm happy to give with joy.

So as we receive the offering, think about that. Is your motivation to give guilt or is it a choice you have made because you have rearranged your life and put Jesus at the center of it all?

Let's pray and then the ushers will pass the buckets.¹¹

¹¹ Rocket Company, Giving Rocket, 2014: Retrieved November 22, 2023, <http://therocketcompany.com/giving/login>

APPENDIX O**Scripts for Email Follow-Up****First Time Guest Email Follow-up**

Date

Name & Address Block

Hello (guest):

Thank you for coming to Gateway this past Sunday. It was great having you in our service. I hope you were warmly welcomed because we love people. I hope you found the worship and the message inspirational because we really love God.

I noticed on your connection card that you made a huge commitment about your relationship with Jesus Christ. I am excited for you because it is one of the most important decisions you can make. I have enclosed a brochure to help you take important steps with your decision.

By the way, I am inviting you back this coming Sunday for the conclusion of my brand-new teaching called "New You". The atmosphere will be inviting, and worship will be dynamic. I hope you can make it and invite someone. You will not be disappointed! We have two worship opportunities on Sunday mornings: **9:30 & 11:00 AM**. So come early so that you will not miss a thing! You can always expect dynamic worship, friendly people, and a relevant message.

Visit our website at www.gatewaynow.org, and learn a great deal about our Church, and the latest activities. You can even donate to our Church. If you have any questions or would like to connect with us at other times, let us know.

Again, thank you for coming to Gateway. I hope to see you again this Sunday.

Faithfully His,

(Follow of Team Member)

Second Time Guest Email Follow-up

Date

Name & Address Block

Hello (guest):

Thank you for coming back to Gateway this past Sunday morning. It was great having you here. I hope you were warmly welcomed because we love people. I hope you found the worship and the message inspirational because we really love God.

I am inviting you back again this coming Sunday for the continuation of my new must hear message series called, "Your Part Matters". It will be a message about destiny and purpose. We have two service opportunities on Sundays: **9:30 & 11am**. So come early and you will not miss a thing! You can always expect dynamic worship, casual atmosphere, friendly people, and a relevant message. We are a design for the whole family. *By the way, our momentum men's meeting is on this Saturday morning at 9:30am. Join us for a good breakfast and great discussion. We will finish up around 10:30am. You are invited.*

Visit us online at www.gatewaynow.org. You can learn a great deal about our Church and the latest activities. You can also find us on Facebook @ gatewaynow. If you have any questions or would like to connect with us at other times, feel free to join our Bible Study small group on Sunday morning at 9:25 & 10:40 am..

Again, thank you for coming, and have a great week!

Faithfully His,

(Follow of Team Member)

Third Time Guest Email Follow-up

Date

Name & Address Block

Hello (guest):

It was great having you back at Gateway again this past Sunday. I hope you were warmly greeted as our guest; most importantly, I hope you found the service helpful to your life.

I am inviting you back again this coming Sunday for our special Mothers Day service. As a mother, you work hard to bless your children. Our service will be designed to bless you. We have two service opportunities on Sunday: **9:30 & 11:00 am**. So come early and you will not miss a thing! You can always expect dynamic worship, friendly people, and a relevant message. We are a design for the whole family.

Again, thank you for coming back to Gateway, and I hope to see you again this Sunday. By the way, I am praying God's best for you this week. Expect to experience God's "favor".

Faithfully His,

(Follow of Team Member)

Fourth Time Guest Email Follow-up

Date

Name & Address Block

Hello (guest):

It was great having you in worship again this past Sunday. I am praying God's peace for you as you seek His will. I am excited about the future of our Church, and I would love to share our vision with you. You will hear me talk a lot about it over the next few months.

By the way, this Sunday's service is our "Celebrate the Harvest Sunday". If you can make it, you will not be disappointed. We are going to get our praise on!

Finally yet importantly, Pat and I wish you and your family a Happy Thanksgiving! Have a blessed week!

Faithfully His,

(Follow of Team Member)

Fifth Time Guest Email Follow-up

Date

Name & Address Block

Hello (guest):

It was great to see you in worship again this past Sunday. I did not get a chance to speak with you, but it was great seeing you here.

I am inviting you back this coming Sunday for the conclusion of my new must hearing series called "***Thrive***". *It is a personal finance series that teaches you how to live with margin and live on mission.* I hope you can make it and invite someone. You won't be disappointed.

I am praying God's best for you this week, so expect the unexpected.

Faithfully His,

(Follow of Team Member)

APPENDIX P

Script for Follow up Phone Calls

First Follow up Call

Hi, I'm (caller) with Gateway Church. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time. I want to take a moment to thank you for coming... I hope you felt welcome. I am inviting you back again next Sunday...

Second Follow-up Call

Hi, I'm (caller) with Gateway Church. Sorry to bother. I just want to thank you for coming back again. Do you have any questions about the church...? You can go to www.gatewaynow.org to find out about the latest happening at the church. I am inviting you back again next Sunday... If you haven't had a chance to stop by "After Service," to meet our pastor and leadership team, you should do this Sunday. It only takes a minute. Can I expect to see you again this Sunday? Thanks again for coming back.

Third Follow-up Call

Hi, I'm (caller) with Gateway Church. Did I catch you at a good time? Great! Tell me about your experience at the church so far? Have you had a chance to meet anyone new? If you are available over the next few weeks, I would love for you to volunteer for a "First-Serve Opportunity." It will give you a chance to help out and meet members of the team. Are you interested? Great! I'll get you signed up next week. Until then, have a great week.

Fourth Follow-up Call

Hi, I'm (caller) with Gateway Church. Do you have a minute? We have a new small group class coming up called... You might be interested. We have a great facilitator, and the class is interactive. You should sign up for it. I'm a part of the class and would love to have you join it with me. It's a six-week commitment, but it's a lot of fun. You can go to www.gatewaynow.org learn more about it. When I see you again, at church, I will give you a brochure about the class. Thanks for your time and have a great week.

APPENDIX Q**CHURCH TAKE-HOME QUESTIONNAIRE****Church Feedback Questionnaire****Contact Information**

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email: _____

Age: _____

1. How did you hear about the Church?

- I noticed it while driving by
- Social Media
- Invited by a friend
- Internet Search
- Other (Please list)
- _____

2. Which Service Did You Attend?

- 9:30 am
- 11 am

3. What First Attracted You to This Church (Check All That Apply)?

- The worship
- The sermons
- The Community
- The activities/events
- The refreshments
- The opportunities for outreach
- The small groups
- Close to home/convenience
- I knew other church members who attended
- My parents and/or other family members attend this church
- I share the same denomination as this church
- I heard positive reviews about the church
- I liked a social media post or some other ad online

- It fits my style/aesthetic preferences
 - Other
-

4. Do You Find Your Answer(s) to #3 still an Attractive Feature of This Church?

- Yes
- No

5. Why or Why Not (Choose All That Apply)?

- My answer to #4 is still an attractive feature of the church
 - Change in church leadership or pastor
 - Change in church mission
 - Change in worship team or worship style
 - Change in culture/community aspect
 - Other
-

6. Do You Feel Welcomed Here?

- Yes
- No

7. How Would You Rate the Overall Church Service?

- Poor
- Below Average
- Average
- Above Average
- Excellent

8. What Three Words Would You Use to Describe the Pastor's Speaking Style?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

9. The Length of the Sermons Are:

- Far too long
- Somewhat long
- A good length
- Somewhat short
- Far too short

10. What Three Words Would You Use to Describe the Worship Style?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

11. What Prevents You from Getting More Engaged at Church?

- I am actively involved in church.
- I do not have enough time.
- I am not interested in being more involved at church.
- I have not connected with many people at church.
- I am not a member or a new church member.
- I do not have transportation.
- Other

12. Do you have any children? If so, please list each of their ages. We would love to help them get involved with our church community.

13. Were you welcomed as you entered the facility? Were you alone or with others? Did you feel comfortable finding a seat?

- Yes
- No

We want to ensure that each of our church visitors feels welcome and included from the moment they walk in the door. So please answer truthfully about how your experience with us was.

Explain: _____

14. Any suggestions regarding ushers, greeters, or your overall experience upon entering the church?

Feedback on Church Facility

1. How did the entry foyer feel as you first walked in?

- Uninviting
- Overwhelming but interesting
- Neutral
- Interesting
- Inviting

2. Were you able to locate the restrooms quickly?

- I was not able to locate the restrooms.
- I had to ask multiple people.
- I could not find them myself, but someone walked me there.
- I had to search a little, but I found them.
- They were clearly marked and easy to find.

3. How did you feel about the worship space where the service took place?

- It was overcrowded and overwhelming.
- There were limited seats and no ushers to assist.
- I eventually found a seat on my own.
- I asked an usher for help, and they seated me.
- I could see where seats were available and found a spot.

4. How did you find the building? Was it easy to find parking? Was there assistance in the parking lot from one of our church volunteers?

5. Did you feel there was enough space to mingle in the foyer as our church's members greeted you?

- Yes
- No

Satisfaction Survey

1. Do you feel spiritually revitalized by attending church?

- Yes
 No

2. Do you think that your faith has grown since attending church?

- Yes
 No

3. Answer True or False to the Following Questions:

- (Yes or No) Do you still feel welcome here?
- (Yes or No) Do you think other guests feel welcome here too?
- (Yes or No) Do you think that the church leadership team is doing an excellent job?
- (Yes or No) Do you feel the pastor's teachings are from the Word of God?
- (Yes or No) Do you think the church's mission statement & teaching are biblically sound?
- (Yes or No) Do you believe that church leadership allocates funds wisely?
- (Yes or No) Do you think this church is making a significant difference in the community?
- (Yes or No) Do you think this church is making a significant difference in our city?

4. Do You Have Any Comments/Suggestions to Add to This Church Questionnaire?

APPENDIX R

Church Sit-down Interview Questionnaire

Internal Purpose Only

1. Gender

- Male
- Female
-

2. Age

- Under twenty
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70+

3. Ethnicity/Race (Choose All That Apply):

- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- White

4. What First Brought You to Our Church?

- The worship
- The sermons
- The Community
- The activities/events
- The refreshments
- The opportunities for outreach
- The small groups
- Close to home/convenience
- I knew other church members who attended
- My parents and/or other family members attend this church
- I share the same denomination as this church
- I heard positive reviews about the church

- I liked a social media post or some other ad online
- It fits my style/aesthetic preferences
- Other

5. How Long Have You Been Attending?

- Less than eight weeks
- 2-6 months

6. What Do You Look Forward to Most About Coming to Church?

- Sermon
- Worship
- Fellowship
- Hearing about church activities
- The refreshments
- Other:

7. Do you still feel welcome here?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

8. How Likely Are You to Bring a Friend or non-Christian to this Church?

- Very unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Unsure
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely

9. Why or Why Wouldn't You Invite Someone to This Church?

10. On a scale from one to 10, how do you rate the church's commitment to outreach?

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|------|---|---|---|-------------|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Not Good | | | Okay | | | | Exceptional | | |

11. Have you made any significant friendship connections since you started attending?

- Yes
 No

12. Do you think our church programs are fun and engaging?

- Yes
 No

13. Are There Any Types of Church Ministries You Would Like to Get Involved With?

- The music (singing or band)
 The children
 Youth
 Senior Adult
 Guest Relations
 Outreach
 The new member welcoming team
 Other (Please Name)

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest)

1. On a Scale of One to Five, How Well Do You Understand Our Mission?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

2. Do You Feel Spiritually Fed After Services?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

3. Do You Feel that The Church Cares About Its Members?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

4. Does Our Music Resonate with You?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

5. Do You Feel Our Spending Aligns with Our Mission?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

6. Do You Feel Engaged in the Church?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

7. Which Small Groups are You Attending?

- Bible Fellowship Group
- Women's Life Group
- Momentum Men's Life Group
- Praise Team Life Group
- Outreach Life Group
- Music Life Group
- Summer Life Group
- Health & Fitness
- Others _____

8. If not, Why Not?

9. How Do You feel about Contributing to Our Mission Program?

- Great
- Good
- Okay
- Not sure
- Not aware of missions

10. Are You Interested in Church Membership?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

11 What is preventing you from moving forward with membership?

12. If you were given the opportunity, would you become a member of GWC?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

13. Do You Have Any Thoughts or Comments Before We Conclude?

APPENDIX S

Gateway Church Membership Covenant Agreement

Gateway Church Membership Covenant

Having received Christ as my Lord and Savior and been baptized by immersion after my salvation as a testimony of my faith in Jesus Christ and being in agreement with Gateway Church's Statement of Faith, Purpose, and Strategy, I now feel led by the Holy Spirit to unite with the Gateway Church family. In doing so, I commit myself to God and to the other members to do the following:

I WILL FAITHFULLY PARTICIPATE IN A LIFE GROUP AT GATEWAY

- ... By finding a group where I can connect
- ... By warmly welcoming those who visit
- ... By encouraging the other members in my Small Group
- ... By seeking to grow spiritually with my group

I WILL PROTECT THE UNITY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By acting in love toward other members and guest
- ... By refusing to gossip
- ... By following the leaders

I WILL SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By praying for its growth
- ... By inviting non-Christians to attend
- ... By a lifestyle committed to worship God, grow together & serve others

I WILL SERVE THE MINISTRY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By discovering and using my gifts and talents
- ... By being equipped to serve by my pastors and other leaders

... By developing a servant's heart

I WILL SUPPORT THE TESTIMONY OF MY CHURCH

... By attending faithfully

... By living a godly life

... By giving regularly and cheerfully to financially support the Church

I WILL LEARN WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MEMBER OF GATEWAY CHURCH

... By reading the book called "I am a church member"

... By studying 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 in my bible

... By setting a goal to complete the study within 30 days of signing this covenant

We Believe.....

We believe God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two distinct, complementary genders together reflect the image and nature of God (Gen 1:26-27, NIV). Rejection of one's biological sex is a rejection of the image of God within that person. We believe that the term "marriage" has only one meaning: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union, as delineated in Scripture (Gen 2:18-25, NIV). We believe that God intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married to each other (1 Cor. 6:18; 7:2-5; Heb 13:4, NIV). We believe that God has commanded that no intimate sexual activity be engaged in outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

We believe that any form of sexual immorality (including adultery, fornication, homosexual behavior, bisexual conduct, bestiality, incest, and use of pornography) is sinful and offensive to God (Matt 15:18-20, 1 Cor 6:9-10). We believe that in order to preserve the function and integrity of Gateway Church as the local Body of Christ and to provide a biblical role model to the Gateway Assembly of God members and the community, it is imperative that all persons employed by Gateway Assembly of God in any capacity or who serve as volunteers, agree to and abide by this statement on Marriage, Gender, and Sexuality (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:14-16; 1 Thess. 5: 22, NIV).

We believe God offers redemption and restoration to all who confess and forsake their sin, seeking His mercy and forgiveness through Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19-21; Rom 10:9-10; 1 Cor 6:9-11, NIV). We believe everyone must be afforded compassion, love, kindness, respect, and dignity (Mark 12:28-31; Luke 6:31, NIV). Hateful and harassing behavior or attitudes directed toward any individual are to be repudiated and are not in accord with Scripture nor the doctrines of Gateway Assembly of God.

We believe all human life is sacred and created by God in His image. Human life is of inestimable worth in all its dimensions, including pre-born babies, the aged, the physically or mentally challenged, and every other stage or condition from conception through natural death. We are therefore called to defend, protect, and value all human life (Ps 139, NIV).

The statement of faith does not exhaust the extent of our beliefs. The Bible itself, as the inspired and infallible Word of God that speaks with final authority concerning truth, morality, and the proper conduct of mankind, is the sole and final source of all that we believe. For the Gateway Assembly of God's faith, doctrine, practice, policy, and discipline, our Georgia Assemblies of God Board of Presbyters is the Gateway Assembly of God's final interpretive authority on the Bible's meaning and application.

Four Commitments of Membership

I commit my life to Jesus Christ as my Savior.

I commit to being a disciple of Christ through Water Baptism

I commit to faithful church attendance and giving.

I commit to the church's teachings as taught in the membership covenant of fundamental truths.

Statement of Agreement

The information in this application is correct to the best of my knowledge.

Should my membership application be accepted, I agree to be bound by the constitution, bylaws, and policies of Gateway Church.

Name _____ Date _____

APPENDIX T

Before You Join the Church Brochure (FRONT)

What can I expect from The Church?

- We will administer to your spiritual needs.
- We will Help you fulfill your God given purpose.
- We will equip you to serve others using your God given gifts & talents.
- We will provide opportunities for Christian fellowship.
- We will assist you with godly counsel.
- We will serve you & members of your family in times of grief and bereavement.
- We will sustain you with prayer & concern during distressing circumstances of life.
- We will be a good manager of your financial contribution to the church.

Why do we exist as a Church?



www.gatewaynow.org

We're Making Our Presence, Known, Felt, and Last!

Thank you for taking an interest in membership at Gateway. We offers three basic ways to help you get connected and informed about our church: After Service, Gateway Connect, and The Growth Track Class. "After Service" provides the initial first contact with church leadership and staff. Immediately following Sunday morning worship, our guest are invited to spend just a few minutes getting acquainted. "Gateway Connect" is a fun & exciting way to meet new people, and learn about our church and ministries. *Gateway Connect* meets once a month and immediately following the service in the Café. "The Growth Track Class" (*membership class*), lets you explore all the possibilities of membership. The Growth Track will take you through the basics of membership to the excitement of finding the ministry that uniquely fits you. No commitments are expected with attending the class. If you have specific questions about our Church, feel free to call us. We would be delighted to discuss our ministries with you.

Sincerely,

Pastor Loyd Johnson

Before You join the Church!



706.701.8868

Before You Join the Church Brochure (BACK)

What is expected of members of Gateway Church?

I. Help us fulfill our Vision as a Church.

- By valuing Jesus & His Church.
- By Valuing people.
- By valuing diversity.
- By valuing generosity.
- By valuing life groups.
- By valuing volunteerism.

II. Help us fulfill our purpose as a Church.

- By praying for the Church & the leadership.
- By giving regularly to support the Church.
- By volunteerism of your time, gifts & natural talents.
- By serving in areas of leadership when appropriate.

III. Help us be the Church.

- By regularly attending worship.
- By consistently scheduling time for prayer .
- By attending a bible study whenever possible.
- By loving the Church.
- By stepping up for God.
- By stepping up to Grow.

IV. Help us grow the Church..

- By getting involved in all Church outreach.
- By inviting people to Church on a regular basis.
- By helping us serve the community when you have the opportunity.
- By sharing your faith with those God place in your life.

We make it our goal to help you find your place in ministry.

We use information you provide from the following area:

1. Information you personally provide to us.

A. The Holy Spirit will often direct people to serve or help in vital areas of the Church. We provide the opportunity.

2. Information obtained from various Ministry Gift Assessments.

A. You will be asked to complete a few simple but meaningful assessments in the privacy of your home, and provide us with the results.

B. We will match the results with your interest and availability to serve.

3. Information taken from your membership application.

A. We asked you to check areas in which you have experience or interest in serving on the membership application.

Ministry Dept Leadership:

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Church Office | 706-701-8868 |
| Children Ministry | Patricia Johnson |
| Student Ministry | |
| Hospitality | Barbara Trussell |
| • Ushers | |
| • Greeters | |
| Praise & Worship | David Marshall |
| Praise Dance | Armethia Anderson |
| Sound & Media Dept. | Mark Hunter |
| Café | Connie Blake |

~ Places to Serve ~

@ Gateway Church

The Children:

- *Promise Land Nursery (0 to 2yrs)
- *Jericho Junction (3 to 5 yrs old)
- *Gateway Children Church (7-9 yrs.)
- *Route 66 (Six to Eleven yrs old)

The Student Ministries

- *Highpoint Youth (Twelve to sixteen yrs old)

The Women:

- *Women Ministries

The Men:

- *Men Ministries

The Hospitality:

- *Ushers & Greeters; *Gateway Café; *Care Ministry

Church Missions:

- *Raise the awareness & support for Church Missions

Church Media

- *Sound, Lighting, & Media

Altar Ministry

- *Prayer & Intercessory

Church Security

- *Monitoring Surveillance; *Security Sweep

Volunteer Ministry

- *Coordinator, train, & retrain volunteers

Praise & Worship Team

- *Weekly rehearsal & singing commitment

Life Groups

- *Lead or assist a Life Group for a Semester

Creative Design Team

- *Design banners, message series, other Church designs

We are a 21st Century Church with a 21st Century Message! *COME GROW WITH US.*

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IRB APPROVAL LETTER**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 14, 2022

Lloyd Johnson
Lucien Fortier

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY22-23-298 From Attender to Church Member.

Dear Lloyd Johnson and Lucien Fortier,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds that your study does not meet the definition of human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research because your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46.102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office