

Attracting and Assimilating Unchurched People in the 21st Century A Mission Portland Study
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Participating Churches: Average Worship Attendance (9/31/00)

[Christian Life Center](#) (W) 766
City Bible Church (NE) 3000
[City Harvest Church](#) (WA) 450
Crossroads Church of Christ (NE) 675
East Hill Foursquare Church (E) 5500
[Faith Center Church](#) (WA) 500
Good Shepherd Community Church (E) 3000+
[Greater Portland Bible](#) (SW) 1074
[Mt. Olivet Baptist](#) (N) 1400
New Beginnings Christian Center (NE) 3000
[New Heights Church](#) (WA) 3000
[New Hope Community Church](#) (SE) 1700
[Oregon City Nazarene](#) (SE) 406
[Portland Christian Center](#) (SW) 1790
[Rolling Hills Community Church](#) (SW) 2875
[Sunset Presbyterian Church](#) (W) 2300

The 16 Participating Churches are located in seven regions of the metropolitan area:

N – 1 North Portland
WA – 3 Vancouver, WA
SW – 3 Southwest Portland
SE – 2 Southeast Portland and Oregon City
NE – 3 Northeast Portland
E – 2 Gresham and Boring
W – 2 Northwest Portland and Aloha

These 16 leading churches represent nearly 10% of the weekly worship attendance of the Portland area. The following are the combined key statistics for the participating churches:

Weekly worship attendance 34,436
Weekly number of visitors: 532
Annual number of conversions: 5381
Annual number of new members: 2477 (many don't record membership)
Weekly Adult Education attendance: 4284
Weekly small group attendance: 11,270

These 16 churches will be highlighted each month by region beginning in January 2001.

Context of Study

This study was conducted within the Portland, Oregon –Vancouver, Washington metropolitan area. According to bizjournals.com demographic journal, the greater Portland metropolitan area ranked twenty-second among America's largest metropolitan areas in 1998 (Thomas "Largest" par. 10). From 1990 to 1998 Portland was the seventh fastest growing metropolitan area in America with 19.83% growth in population (Thomas "Largest" par. 2). Projections for the year 2020 indicate that the greater Portland area will remain one the America's largest and fastest growing urban centers (Thomas "Projected" par. 3).

The context of the study is churches in Portland, Oregon successfully reaching unchurched people of the city. The cities of the world and our nation have become the modern day mission fields of the world because that is where the people are. In 1990 only 10% of the world's population lived in urban areas. By the late 1990s approximately 50% of the world's people were urban dwellers. In the United States 90% of the population live in urban settings (Dennison City 13-14). The 50 largest metropolitan areas of America alone account for a population of approximately 150 million people (Thomas "Largest" par. 10).

Portland has often been thought of as one of the most unchurched cities in the most unchurched region of the country. Many had estimated only a 3-9% church involvement. However, recent research reports that average worship attendance in Portland is actually about 350,000 or approximately 20% of the 1.75 million people in the Portland-Vancouver area (Dennison City 155). Portland has approximately 1,500 churches, a ratio of one for every 1200 people. This is below the national average of one church for every 700 residents (Dennison City 39, 49). However, Portland does have a number of larger churches as well. According to a December 22, 1997 attendance report of Portland area churches printed by The Foundation of Hope, 33 churches had worship attendance of 1000 or more and a dozen churches had attendance ranging from 2000 to 8000. The 50 largest churches account for 87,000 weekly worshippers or 25% of the church population (1-2).

Based on the population and growth of the Portland metropolitan area and its relatively strong church involvement, Portland is representative of the majority of America's larger metropolitan areas. Portland is also a city that faces challenges that are common to large urban areas. Therefore, whatever practices and principles are discovered to be effective in Portland will likely be transferable or adaptable to churches in the top 250 metropolitan areas of the United States, all of which have a population of 100,000 or more (Thomas "Rankings" par. 4).

Statement of Purpose The purpose of the study was to identify transferable principles and practices used by churches that have been successful in attracting and assimilating unchurched people.

Research Questions

- Question #1 What principles and practices used by these churches have been most successful in attracting and evangelizing unchurched people?
- Question #2 How do these churches welcome and follow-up unchurched visitors and new converts?
- Question #3 How do these churches provide an opportunity for new people to gain a sense of belonging?
- Question #4 How do these churches see that people are disciplined into fully devoted followers of Christ?
- Question #5 How do these churches help people take up the responsibility to serve in personal ministry?

Population and Sample To qualify for this study churches were required to meet the following criteria:

- 1) Churches for this study were selected from the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area.
- 2) This study only included churches that hold to an orthodox position on the Trinity and Salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.
- 3) Churches selected for the study had to have a minimum average of 10 visitors per week. For larger churches, the number of visitors had to equal approximately 1% of the average weekly worship attendance.
- 4) Participating churches had to have reported a minimum of 30 conversions. For larger churches the total number of conversions reported had to equal at least 2% of Sunday worship attendance.

- 5) For those churches that promote church membership, a consideration for participation in this study was that at least 50% of the new members received in the past 12 months be formerly unchurched.
- 6) To qualify for this study churches had to demonstrate a minimum level of effectiveness in connecting adults into groups. The combined number of adults attending Christian education classes and small groups had to equal at least 25 percent of the weekend worship attendance.
- 7) Churches selected for this study had to indicate that at least 10% of their congregation is involved in an identifiable ministry.
- 8) Finally, churches had to be willing and able to provide the data necessary to complete the study. First, they were required to submit a completed Participant Information Questionnaire. Second, they were required to provide a qualified representative for the church leader interview. Third, a tour of the church campus was conducted. Fourth, printed materials were supplied that address the research questions. Finally, the church arranged interviews with three new Christians who have been successfully assimilated within the previous 12 to 24 months.

Assimilation Defined “Assimilation is the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church” (Warren 309). The first issue is getting the attention of those you wish to reach so that they choose to visit your church. Once they have visited, the issue is follow-up that is effective in getting them to return on a regular basis. Then the issue is clearly and convincingly communicating the gospel so that they can make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. After making a commitment to Christ and the church, the new believer needs to grow in vital relationship with Christ as a disciple and in fellowship with other Christians. The final step of assimilation is that every Christian needs to take up the responsibility and stewardship of personal ministry.

Characteristics of an Assimilated Person What are the characteristics of someone who has been assimilated into the life of a local church? Win and Charles Arn offer nine characteristics of an incorporated member, which parallel Bob Logan’s assimilation continuum:

1. Identifies with the goals of the church.
2. Attends worship services regularly.
3. Experiences spiritual growth and progress.
4. Becomes a member of the Body.
5. Has 5-10 new friends in the church.
6. Has an appropriate task or role that matches spiritual giftedness.
7. Is involved in meaningful fellowship in a small group.
8. Regularly tithes to the church.
9. Participates in the great commission by spreading the Good News to friends and relatives (Arn 49-55; Beyond 109).

Assimilation Processes Each local congregation will need to determine its characteristics of assimilation and put in place a system or process that helps newcomers reach those objectives. There is no assimilation plan that will fit every church. Though churches vary in size, worship style, and location, the stages that a newcomer transitions through in the process of assimilation often follow a general pattern:

1. Attraction/recruitment: the new person is drawn to the church.
2. Testing: the new person attends for the first time.
3. Returning/affiliating: the new person revisits and begins to participate.
4. Joining: the new person takes official steps to become a member.

5. Going deeper: the new member identifies gifts and talents and finds a meaningful place of service.
6. Being sent: the new member is enlisted in outreach ministries (Oswald 104-109).

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