DESCRIBING THE ASSIMILATION EXPERIENCES OF NEW CONVERTS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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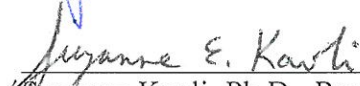
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Abstract

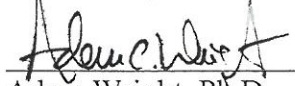The purpose of the current phenomenological research was to explore the assimilation experiences of adult new converts into churches affiliated with the Baptist Missionary Association of America in order to help ministerial leaders understand what new converts experienced at conversion, looked forward to, or resisted regarding their assimilations. The researcher interviewed 28 participants representing seven BMA churches located in the Ark-La-Tex region of the southern United States. Participants included 21 new converts, baptized within the past one to three years, and a leading staff member from each church. The researcher recorded and transcribed interviews, separated excerpts from the interviews into categories, analyzed the data, and determined common themes from the data. Nineteen findings resulted from the study. New converts described their experiences of conversion, what they anticipated or resisted regarding retention and spiritual growth, the effect of church assimilation strategies, and how ministerial leaders might benefit from their experiences. Findings included the proximity of conversion to major life events, the eagerness of converts to join a family-like fellowship, acknowledgment of particular fears regarding baptism, contrasting views between converts and leaders regarding how converts learn what to do next, inability to describe intentional assimilation processes, and the importance of available leaders to assist new converts. The researcher determined 14 conclusions that resulted in eight recommendations for churches and church leaders and 14 recommendations for future researchers. The researcher attempted to fill a gap in knowledge by seeking the input of new converts regarding assimilation.

Keywords: new converts, assimilation, phenomenological

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my great wife, daughter, son, and parents.

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I want to acknowledge the supportive role played by the following individuals and groups in helping me to complete this dissertation:

Dr. Norma Hedin for her kind words, timely feedback, encouragement, and friendship.

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Dr. Charley Holmes for "giving me the go" and setting things in order for me to earn another degree.

BMA Seminary students, faculty, staff, and trustees. Students, thanks for your patience while my attention has been focused in multiple directions. Faculty, thanks for your patience, sound advice, and support while I have been distracted over the past four years. Staff, thanks for your grace, patience, and hard work that has kept the school running during my studies. Trustees, thanks for your encouragement and the investment each of you made in supporting my education and the work of BMA Seminary.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Christian ministerial leadership has existed for two millennia of church history. Biblical and early church records indicate a persistent concern of church leaders for the spiritual well-being of individuals who unite themselves with the church. For example, the apostles Paul and John rejoiced at the spiritual growth of those they loved (2 John 4; 3 John 4; 2 Thessalonians 1:3), while Paul and Peter urged other believers to grow in the Christian faith and its virtues (Romans 12:9-21; Colossians 2:6-7; 2 Peter 1:5-11). During apostolic times new converts received baptism and church fellowship soon after their conversion experiences (Hall, 1991, p. 15). After the apostolic age of the New Testament, the church often recognized new converts as *catechumen* or ones *under construction*. Although regarded as believers, the church required catechumen to receive moral instruction and theological training prior to baptism. Such instruction often involved two or three years of expected regular attendance, learning, and increased scrutiny during months leading up to baptism for the purpose of ensuring the genuineness of each convert's conversion (Hall, 1991, pp. 15-16).

Multiple data sources and research projects reflect a similar concern from contemporary church leaders (Hemphill & James, 2011, p. 48; Kim, 2005, p.41; Lorick, 2013, p. 112; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 15). Caring for the spiritual well-being of individuals within the church reveals the essential role of Christian ministerial leaders and churches. Recently, authors have called for a restoration in identity and integrity among Baptists (Nettles, 2005, p. 11; White, Duesing, & Yarnell, 2008, pp. 15-20) that regains

meaningful church membership (Dever, 2005, p. 45) and confronts the dangers of a pragmatic approach to Christian life (Hammett, 2005, ap. 11). Other pastors and ministerial leaders have expressed interest in closing the proverbial back door of their churches (McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 9-10; Nolan, 2004, p. 179; Osborne, 2008, p. 15). Closing of the back door means keeping members in the church, active and fulfilled (Rainer, 1993, p. 281) while also attending to disciple making and leadership development of new converts (Hatmaker, 2011, p. 103; Hemphill & James, 2011, p. 43; Mims, 1994, p. 103; Warren, 1995, p. 309). Each point-of-view includes leaders concerned for enhanced levels of membership within church.

Framed by studies in ministerial leadership and leadership theory, a research question that asked, "How do adult new converts describe their experiences of assimilation?" provided opportunity for research to assist ministerial leaders with strategies for the effective assimilation of new converts. Proponents of biblical servant leadership encourage leaders to take full responsibility for leading others on to a divine agenda (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2001, p. 20; Howell, 2003, p. 301), demonstrating passion for God's honor and a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of others, and accomplishing God's mandate to make disciples of all nations by being faithful stewards and taking the initiative as servant-leaders (Howell, 2003, p. 301). Studies in ministry design promote nurture as a major function of the church by which individuals "grow and develop, as they become like Christ" (Rose, in press). Data collected in the current study generated findings that affirm the realities of how ministerial leaders actually lead new converts toward a divine agenda, increased spiritual growth, and discipleship.

Leadership studies supported the current study by emphasizing the need for

leaders who listen to followers and seek the betterment of both themselves and their followers. For example, the process of transformational leadership encourages leaders to engage with others by listening, learning, and creating connections that raise levels of motivation and morality in both leaders and followers (Burns, 1978, p. 19). Transforming leaders welcome contact with followers at all levels and view both people and new ideas with great interest (T. Anderson, 1992, p. 51). Kellerman (2008), in her book on followership, touted the equal value of leaders and followers (p. xviii) and suggested that leadership and followership "be thought of in tandem—as inseparable, indivisible, inconceivable the one without the other" (p. 239). Leaders produce movement that establishes direction, aligns people, and motivates them to overcome barriers to change by appealing to individuals' basic needs, values, and emotions (Kotter, 1990, p. 5).

Ignoring the input of stakeholders regarding decision-making and problem-solving puts leaders at risk of creating inadequate solutions to the wrong problems (Heifetz, 1994, p.118). The current study generated input from adult new converts, or stakeholders, in church. The data collected during interviews allowed new converts to describe their experiences of assimilation into church and affirmed or disavowed the presumptions and practices of ministerial leadership strategies for assimilating new converts.

Introduction to the Problem

Writings since the 1950s indicate that church leaders in the Baptist Missionary Association of America (BMA) considered closing of the proverbial back door critical to effective ministry that addresses the spiritual needs of church members, at least in part,

by assimilating them into the church. Early writings by BMA authors (1950-1975) focused upon helping new church members and converts understand the association's doctrinal distinctiveness and need to fulfill the Great Commission (Cobb, 1954; Cottrell, 1973; Duggar, 1960; Gaylor & Blaylock, 1974; Henderson, 1969; Jackson, 1974; Jones, 1965; Leslie, 1956; Silvey, 1975; Williams, 1970). During the 1980s to 2000s, BMA authors focused mostly upon inspirational and devotional writings related to missions, auxiliaries, and local church histories. Such writings addressed concerns mostly associated with Christian living well beyond the initial period of a reader's spiritual conversion and presumed assimilation into the church. While recent BMA writings, such as Cooper (2012) and Johnson (1998), have addressed more directly the need for spiritual growth within BMA churches.

Despite efforts by BMA leaders to assimilate new converts, data collected from 52% of churches affiliated with the BMA in 2011, revealed that an average 22% of the association's total membership regularly attended Sunday morning worship services and an average of 14% regularly attended Sunday school (Hudgens, 2012, p. 114). Figures declined further in 2012, when data collected from 47% of churches revealed that an average of 17% of the association's total membership regularly attended Sunday morning worship services and an average of 14% regularly attended Sunday school (Directory, 2013, p. 92). Quantitative research conducted in 2010, assessed how BMA laypersons perceived discipleship and concluded that the BMA is losing a generation due to its inability to attract persons less than 40 years of age. Researchers identified the BMA as sticky because 92% of respondents had been with their churches for more than five years. Although sticky, the study revealed further that BMA churches lacked the

magnetic elements needed to attract new members (Rainer, Rainer, & Rainer, 2010, p. 5). The literature review further exposed a gap in that no empirical data exists related to the assimilation of new converts into BMA churches. The review also discovered a gap in non BMA literature related to the assimilation of new converts into church.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the assimilation of adult new converts, aged 18 years and older, into BMA churches by inviting them to describe their experiences of assimilation in order to help ministerial leaders understand what new converts anticipate, welcome, look forward to, or resist regarding their assimilations. The following research question guided the study: How do adults baptized as new converts in BMA churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? Consequently, four sub questions exist:

1. How do new converts describe their conversions?

2. What do new converts anticipate, look forward to, or resist regarding assimilation, retention, and spiritual growth?

3. How did church assimilation strategies affect new converts?

4. What information about how new converts describe their experiences of assimilation can help ministerial leaders become more effective in fulfilling their roles as leaders in regard to processes of assimilation?

Rationale

Research problems or questions drive research methodology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.7). The current research problem encouraged a phenomenological study that would allow new converts to describe their subjective experiences of assimilation

into church (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 24; Mertens, 2010, p. 235; Schram, 2006, p. 98). Phenomenological research helped the current researcher to focus upon understanding assimilation within BMA churches from new converts' points-of-view. By conducting interviews with new converts and analyzing written transcripts, the researcher selected excerpts, formulated categories, searched for connecting threads, and discovered common themes. Findings generated from the research confirmed the realities of how ministerial leaders actually lead new converts toward assimilation.

The researcher conducted a qualitative case study in fall 2012, related to assimilation strategies of churches regarding new members. During the spring 2013, he continued to search specifically for recommendations and gaps in the literature pertaining to both the topic of assimilation and research methodology. A review of dissertations concerning assimilation of new church members revealed a gap in the literature. Rushing (2007) conducted quantitative research of 302 church members, at least 18 years old, and 105 church leaders affiliated with Southern Baptist churches. The study explored "the relationship between intentional member retention strategies used by selected Southern Baptist churches and the assimilation of new church members" (p. xi). Rushing recognized that most participants of his study had been long-time church members and recommended future study of new converts to understand how new member strategies affect new believers only (p. 123).

In response to the findings and conclusions of his qualitative research, Hux (2011) also recommended future research on new converts/members to garner their input into assimilation. The research evaluated the effectiveness of evangelism, assimilation, and discipleship strategies in a population of 200 churches affiliated with The Churches of

Christ in Christian Union (p. 1). The research sample included focus groups selected by pastors from ten churches. Hux asked pastors to select members based upon each person's knowledge and experience with the church's "general procedures for preparing and receiving members" (p. 74). Hux reported that pastors selected no new converts to participate in the focus groups but determined from his findings that churches need to seek the input of new converts (p. 108). Hux concluded:

> Larger participating churches with staff relied on the subjective evaluation of the staff member to assess the effectiveness of the church's approach for developing new converts rather than converts themselves. Perhaps gaining the insights and perspectives of new attendees and new converts could strengthen and cause churches in The Churches of Christ in Christian Union to be more effective in preparing and gaining members by profession of faith. (pp. 108-109)

Significance of the Study

Biblically, the New Testament admonishes believers to mature spiritually (Hebrews 5:11-14; 1 Peter 2:2) and ministerial leaders to make disciples and develop them in spiritual maturity (Matthew 28:16-20; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 1:28-29). Scholastically, the recommendation of two doctoral dissertations adds substantial credibility to the relevance of the proposed research claim regarding the need to seek input of new converts regarding assimilation experiences. Statistically, dismal figures reflect the BMA's need to improve assimilation strategies (Directory, 2013, p. 92). Data collected during interviews allowed new converts to describe their experiences of assimilation into church and research findings may affirm or disavow the presumptions and practices of ministerial leadership strategies for assimilating new converts.

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Hopefully, findings will assist ministerial leaders with strategies for the effective assimilation of new converts.

Definition of Terms

The list of terms provided operational definitions for the current study that attempted to explain their usage throughout the dissertation. The researcher intended for the definitions of doctrinal terms to abide with the Baptist Missionary Association's doctrinal statement.

Assimilation

The operational definition of assimilation meant the retention, disciple making, and leadership development of new converts.

Baptism

The operational definition for this study regarding baptism adhered to the doctrinal statement of the Baptist Missionary Association of America. The statement defines baptism as "the immersion in water of a believer as a confession of his faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:4) and is prerequisite to church membership" (Hudgens, 2012, p. 47).

Church

For the purposes of the current study, an operational definition of church adhered to the doctrinal statement of the Baptist Missionary Association of America. The statement defines a New Testament *church* as "a local congregation (Acts 16:5; 1 Cor 4:17) of believers in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41) who are united by covenant in belief of what God has revealed and in obedience to what He has commanded (Acts 2:41, 42)" (Hudgens, 2012, p. 47).

Church membership

Leeman (2012a) provided an operational definition of church membership as "a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church" (p. 42).

Leading staff member

The current study used an operational definition for leading staff member as an individual identified by the church or senior pastor as a leader due to his or her position of leadership in the church. Leading staff members included either formally paid staff or non-paid laypersons.

New converts

For purposes of the current study, an operational definition of convert referred to one who has received the gift of eternal life by faith in Christ alone. Kennedy (1996) recognized that conversion demands one receive the gift of eternal life by faith in Christ alone (p. 98). The current study recognized new converts as converts baptized in a BMA church within the past one to three years.

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions included matters related to the willingness of new converts to participate in the current study and the interest of ministerial leaders to assimilate new believers. Limitations included exclusive participation by adults in BMA churches.

Assumptions

1. The researcher assumed that biblical teaching encourages assimilation and spiritual growth of new believers. The New Testament admonishes believers

to mature spiritually (Hebrews 5:11-14; 1 Peter 2:2) and ministerial leaders to make disciples and develop them in spiritual maturity (Matthew 28:16-20; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 1:28-29).

2. The researcher assumed that church members and ministerial leaders are concerned with fulfilling biblical teachings regarding assimilation and spiritual growth of new believers.

3. The researcher assumed researcher access to BMA churches mostly due to his position and relationship with the BMA. The researcher held membership in a Texas BMA church, served as an associational employee in the capacity of academic dean for the BMA's only theological seminary, received ordination from a BMA church in Arkansas, and served the BMA of America as president from 2008-2010. Such affiliation provided the researcher with access to the research population.

4. The researcher assumed that churches had baptized adults within the past one to three years. In the most current statistical data, an average 54% of BMA churches between 2009-2013 reported an average number of baptisms that exceeded 2,600 (Directory, 2013, p. 92). Churches located within the scope of the current research accounted for 68% of overall BMA baptisms in 2011-2012 (Hudgens, 2012, p. 115) and for 64% in 2012-2013 (Directory, 2013, p. 93). These data supported the assumption that baptized new converts did exist within the population.

5. The researcher assumed participants shared an experience possible to narrate. A homogenous sample of participants, new converts from BMA churches

located in a particular geographical area, interviewed per a prepared interview guide, aided in the discovery of a shared phenomenon.

6. The researcher assumed that participants would share their experiences honestly during the process of interviewing and collection of data.

Limitations

1. The current study was limited, or delimited, to churches affiliated with the BMA, thus, not all churches. Qualitative research does not result in findings a researcher can generalize (Creswell, 2013, p. 101). Regardless of the delimitation, the current study addressed a gap in knowledge related to assimilation of new converts in both BMA and non BMA churches. The research design will permit future researchers to replicate the study with new coverts outside the BMA.

2. The current study was limited to adult converts, thus, avoided children and youth.

3. The current study was limited by the potential for logistical issues to hinder the actual interviews. Although the possibility of such hindrances existed, the researcher did not anticipate such as a terminal threat to the current research.

4. The current study was limited to a gatekeeper's ability to arrange participant interviews or provide the researcher with contact information.

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Nature of the Study

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Phenomenological study allows a researcher to focus on what an experience means for persons who have had the experience and are able to describe it comprehensively (Schram, 2006, p. 98). Interviews serve as the primary method of data

collection for such a study (Merriam, 2009, p. 25; Mertler, 2014, p. 11). Qualitative

research usually favors small sample sizes (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 83). The current

study divided BMA churches into three categories determined by average church

worship attendance: small churches with less than 75; medium churches with 75-199;

and large churches with more than 200. The researcher proposed interviewing seven

adult new converts from at least two churches in each size category, for a total of 21

converts from a minimum of six churches. Additional interviews would involve a leading

staff member from each church, for a minimum of six staff, using prepared interview

guides based upon information gleaned during the review of literature.

Following guidelines established by Dallas Baptist University, the researcher

received permission from the Committee for the Protection of Human Participants, each

church, and each participant before proceeding with the current study. Informed consent

forms revealed potential risks to the church and participants, explained interview

protocol, and verified the researcher's intent to report the findings honestly and

confidentially. The researcher used NVivo 10 software for analysis of data and the

formulation of themes based upon the research. Allowing participants to review

transcripts of their interviews for accuracy enhanced the current study's credibility.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The researcher's purpose for Chapter 2 centered upon reviewing and synthesizing

literature related to church assimilation strategies and the actual experiences of new

converts. Reviewing the literature aided in defining key terms, describing characteristics

of church assimilation strategies related to new members and new converts, recognizing

common elements related to the topic, biblical foundations, and drawing conclusions

based on the synthesis. Terms emerging from the literature emphasized the use of

assimilation to describe both retention and active participation of new members (Mims,

1994; Moyer, 1994; Rushing 2007). Chapter 3 introduces and articulates the current

study's research design, a phenomenological study, and explains its appropriateness for

addressing questions related to the assimilation of adult new converts in churches

affiliated with the BMA. Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the current study

including research findings and selected participants' quotations as supporting evidence.

Chapter 5 will discuss the current study's findings and make conclusions based upon

information gleaned during the research, including interaction with the literature

reviewed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the current study was to explore the assimilation experiences of adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in churches affiliated with the Baptist Missionary Association of America (BMA). The review synthesizes literature related to the BMA, church assimilation strategies, and the actual experiences of new converts. At times, the literature used the terms new convert, new believer, and new member synonymously. Reviewing the literature aided in defining key terms, describing characteristics of church assimilation strategies related to new members, including new converts, recognizing common elements related to the topic, biblical foundations, and drawing conclusions based on the synthesis.

Baptist Missionary Association of America

The BMA formed in May 1950, as a group of regular Baptist churches in evangelical theology, missions, fundamentals, and eschatology (Hudgens, 2012, p. 6). Approximately 1,200 churches hold membership in the BMA with the majority located in Arkansas and Texas. Data collected from 47% of churches affiliated with the BMA in 2012 revealed that an average 17% of the association's total membership regularly attended Sunday morning worship services and an average of 14% regularly attended Sunday school (Directory, 2013, p. 92). The association formed originally as the North American Baptist Association but changed its name to Baptist Missionary Association in 1969 (Duggar, 1988, pp. 69, 120).

Early and Recent BMA Writings

Early writings by BMA authors (1950-1975) focused upon helping new church members and converts understand the association's doctrinal distinctiveness and need to fulfill the Great Commission. Primary authors included Cobb (1954), Cottrell (1973), Duggar (1960), Gaylor and Blaylock (1974), Henderson (1969), Jackson (1974), Jones (1965), Leslie (1956), Silvey (1975), and Williams (1970). During the 1980s to 2000s, BMA authors focused mostly upon inspirational and devotional writings related to missions, auxiliaries, and local church histories. Such writings addressed concerns mostly associated with Christian living well beyond the initial period of a reader's spiritual conversion and presumed assimilation into the church. Exceptions to that summation included Gauntt (1986), who prepared a guidebook for new converts that encouraged them to learn about and use spiritual disciplines, two remnants of the doctrinal distinctive approach for helping new converts: Lunceford (n. d.) and Zwafford (1983), and revisions of Cobb (1954, 2003) and Jackson (1974, 1986).

While more recent BMA writings continued to resemble those created since the 1980s, four works attempted to address more directly the need for spiritual growth within BMA churches. First, Johnson (1998) provided one of the BMA's initial efforts to address genuine discipleship and Christian growth within the church. In contrast to early BMA writers, Johnson (1998) encouraged spiritual growth that exceeded mere knowledge increases and adherence to the BMA's doctrinal distinctive. Johnson, Professor of Christian Education for the Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary, reviewed biblical examples of disciple making and concluded that nurturing disciples could occur best in small groups that develop growing relationships (pp. 8-9).

Second, Cooper (2012) edited the BMA's *DiscipleWay* material designed to assist

pastors and local churches in disciple making. Third, Attebery, Crawley, and Johnson

(2012) recorded the historical, philosophical, educational, and biblical bases for the

BMA's development of *DiscipleWay.* Development of the material came at the request

of BMA associational leaders attempting to enhance membership in BMA churches by

creating a relational and intentional strategy for making disciples (Crawley, 2012, p. 57).

Fourth, Attebery (2014) used focus groups to interview 25 individuals identified by their

pastors as actively involved in discipleship training and life-long learning (p. 126). He

determined that three factors existed in helping develop life-long learners: utilizing real-

life situations to encourage holistic formation, assimilation of disciples into a community

of disciples, and the establishment of a pattern of life-long learning (p. 151).

Research on the BMA

In 2010, BMA associational leaders joined with Rainer Research to conduct an

assessment of how BMA laypersons perceived discipleship. The quantitative survey

included a three-week window for participation with 470 participants, including 381 who

completed the entire survey. Rainer, Rainer, and Rainer (2010) determined a confidence

level of 95% (p. 8). The research concluded that the BMA possessed no formal means of

accomplishing discipleship within its churches. The research also revealed that the BMA

is losing a generation due to its inability to attract persons less than 40 years of age.

Researchers identified the BMA as sticky because 92% of respondents had been with

their churches for more than five years. Although sticky, the study revealed further that

BMA churches lacked the magnetic elements needed to attract new members (Rainer et

al., 2010, p. 5).

Review of the BMA literature discovered no empirical data related exclusively to the assimilation of new converts into the church. In general, Rainer (1999), Rainer (2001), and Rainer and Rainer (2008) provided the most empirical data related to assimilation of church members. Rainer and Rainer (2008) reported the results of a national research project that included more than 1,000 participants, 70% of which left their churches between ages 18 and 22. The researchers determined four components of an essential church important for encouraging church members, particularly those aged 18-22, to view church as essential to their lives. The four components included right structure, right content, right attitude, and right action (Rainer & Rainer, 2008, p. 7). Rainer et al. (2010), the BMA survey, questioned respondents over the same four essential components. Regarding the right structure, Rainer et al. (2010) analysis of the data concluded:

> The problem is that people in the BMA are not practicing discipleship. Over 40% of people in the BMA state that their local churches do not have a formal discipleship process. Over three-fourths of people in the BMA believe they are capable of discipling one-on-one, and almost 9 out of 10 believe they are able to teach another person God's Word. Yet, less than half are actually discipling anyone. (p. 37)

Regarding right content, 38% of BMA respondents disagreed that their churches provided opportunity for members to increase their biblical depth. Regarding right attitude, 38% also disagreed that their churches maintained high expectations that are important to attracting people. Regarding right actions, only 19% of BMA survey respondents claimed to have dropped out of church for more than six months. Thirty-five

percent of BMA dropouts ranged in ages between 18 and 22 years (Rainer et al., 2010, pp. 27-30) and the BMA rated below the national average of 70% dropouts between the ages of 18-22 (Rainer & Rainer, 2008, p. 3). The data revealed that the top four reasons for BMA dropouts related to disconnection, hypocrisy, and personal sin. Researchers concluded that these reasons appeared to relate to issues of discipleship (Rainer et al., 2010, p. 31).

In reference to available literature on discipleship and the findings of Rainer et al. (2010), Crawley (2012) determined that within the BMA an adequate "hands-on process whereby new converts develop disciplines that change their lives to be more like Christ is consistently lacking" (p. 57). Findings of the Rainer et al. (2010) research verified the suspicions of BMA leaders regarding the realities of discipleship within the BMA and provided the empirical data needed to propel further development of the *DiscipleWay* curriculum (Crawley, 2012, p. 64). Although related to spiritual growth, and potentially appropriate for new believers, the BMA's *DiscipleWay* material did not address new converts specifically (Johnson, 2012, p. 73). The review of BMA literature from the 1950s to the present discovered a gap in that no empirical data exists related to the assimilation of new converts into BMA churches.

Studies on Assimilation

The review also discovered a gap in non-BMA literature related to the assimilation of new converts into a church. The literature included quantitative, qualitative, and theological research. Assimilation studies included research in churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, The Church of Christ in Christian Union, and multi-denominational congregations.

Quantitative Study on Assimilation

Rushing (2007) conducted quantitative research of 302 church members, at least 18 years old, and 105 church leaders affiliated with Southern Baptist churches. The study explored "the relationship between intentional member retention strategies used by selected Southern Baptist churches and the assimilation of new church members" (p. xi). Rushing recognized that most participants of his study had been long-time church members and recommended future study of new converts to understand how new member strategies affect new believers only (p. 123).

Qualitative Studies on Assimilation

In response to the findings and conclusions of his qualitative research, Hux (2011) also recommended future research on new converts/members to garner their input into assimilation. The research evaluated the effectiveness of evangelism, assimilation, and discipleship strategies in a population of 200 churches affiliated with The Churches of Christ in Christian Union (p. 1). The research sample included focus groups selected by pastors from ten churches. Hux asked pastors to select members based upon each person's knowledge and experience with the church's "general procedures for preparing and receiving members" (p. 74). Hux reported that pastors selected no new converts to participate in the focus groups but determined from his findings that churches need to seek the input of new converts (p. 108). Hux concluded:

> Larger participating churches with staff relied on the subjective evaluation of the staff member to assess the effectiveness of the church's approach for developing new converts rather than converts themselves. Perhaps gaining the insights and perspectives of new attendees and new converts could strengthen and cause

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churches in The Churches of Christ in Christian Union to be more effective in

preparing and gaining members by profession of faith. (pp. 108-109)

Durey (2002) conducted research to identify transferable principles and practices

used by churches to attract and assimilate the unchurched (p. 5). The research sample

included 15 multidenominational and multiethnic churches from the Portland, Oregon

metropolitan area that averaged between 500 and 5,500 in attendance. Durey interviewed

one leader and three new Christians from each church. Pastors identified the 43 adult

new Christians as successfully assimilated new Christians within the previous 12 to 24

months. According to Durey's (2002) interview guide for new Christians, questions

asked participants how they became Christians, what attracted them to their churches,

why they stayed with the churches, and where they had found meaningful places to serve

(p. 150). Durey's (2002) interview guide for pastors, questioned participants regarding

how they followed up with new converts, provided for basic spiritual growth, and how

they characterized fully assimilated individuals (pp. 62-63).

Findings of Durey's (2002) research determined that personal relationships,

intentional efforts to assimilate, and small groups for spiritual growth provided the most

significant factors in assimilating these new converts (pp. 125-138). Durey (2002) also

stated that neither his research nor current literature provided adequate biblical or

theological foundations for the assimilation of unchurched persons (p. 142). Although

Durey (2002) claimed that the study produced insightful answers to questions asked of

new converts, little information provided direct comparison with answers given by

pastors (p. 90). Durey's (2002) study sought the delimited input of adult new Christians

with a diverse denominational sampling of large churches located in Portland, Oregon.

Theological Studies on Assimilation

Nolan's (2004) research focused upon the biblical writings of the Apostle Paul in an effort "to present a biblical basis for the assimilation of new Christians by which contemporary methods and materials can be evaluated" (Abstract). Nolan concluded that churches seeking a balanced approach to assimilation produced higher assimilation. The balance included theological, methodological, and pedagogical components. Theologically, the church maintains balance between past, present, and future salvation. Methodologically, the church seeks balance among large group, small group, and one-on-one approaches to assimilation. Pedagogically, the church maintains a balance in teaching that emphasizes unity of the Godhead and church along with balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (pp. 178-179). Although Nolan's (2004) study provided potential response to Durey's (2002) request for biblical and theological foundations, it lacked the input of new believers as recommended by Hux (2011) and Rushing (2007). Review of these studies further demonstrated a gap in the literature related to the assimilation of adult new converts in the church.

<div align="center">

New Converts

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Authors in the literature used terms such as convert, justified, new believer, regenerated, and saved to identify those having received the gift of eternal life by faith alone in Jesus Christ. According to the BMA doctrinal statement, the basis for conversion "is wholly on the grace of God apart from works . . . Anyone who will exercise repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved" (Hudgens, 2012, p. 46). Lunceford (n. d.) agreed with Kellar (1963), a founding-father of the BMA and former president of BMA Seminary, who taught that membership in a true

church, a Baptist church, requires regeneration, "One who has not been saved by the grace of God is not a scriptural member of the church" (p. 32). Duggar (1960), also a founding father of the BMA, former secretary of missions, and former president of the BMA Seminary, declared that God always intended for "but one plan of salvation for mankind, and that is that all who believe in Jesus Christ might be saved" (p. 13). Other BMA leaders such as Gaylor and Blaylock (1974) defined justification as a state in which one receives a declaration of righteousness before God that is "obtained by faith apart from any admixture of works" (p. 8). Individuals cannot earn salvation through a system of works, by keeping certain sacraments, or by church membership (Duggar, 1992, p. 21). Henderson (1969), defined salvation as "the state of one who has been saved—made safe—by the Lord Jesus Christ who alone is Savior" (p. 20).

Review of the literature revealed similar views by non-BMA writers and emphasized the need for both faith in Christ alone and changes in a new convert's life. For example, simply walking an aisle, raising a hand, or filling out a card does not guarantee one's conversion (Dever, 2012, p. 66; Issler, 2012, p. 53; Moyer, 1994, p. 339). An individual's appropriate response to the gospel message "means that the person comes to God as a sinner, recognizes that Jesus Christ died for his sins and arose (1 Cor. 15:3-4), and believes—which means to trust, rely, or depend—on him alone for salvation" (Moyer, 1994, p. 339). Likewise, Kennedy (1996) expressed that conversion demands that a person receive the gift of eternal life by faith in Christ alone (p. 98). Using Barna's basic categories of belief-systems to describe born-again Christians, found at www.barna.org, Waggoner (2008) described new converts as "those who have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and believe they will go to heaven because they

have confessed their sins and accepted Christ as their Savior" (p. 29). Individuals receive the gift of salvation by repenting of their sins and professing faith in Christ (Rainer, 2013, p. 70).

Stressing the importance of evangelism and conversion for church follow-up, Kennedy (1996) considered it impossible "to disciple or follow up properly on someone who has not been effectively evangelized" (p. 104). Unfortunately, observations and personal testimonies often reveal genuine converts to Christ who lack maturity in how they live (Dunahoo, 2005, p. 60). Religious conversion results in an individual's change of theological beliefs (Lott, 2010, p. 4) and results in one's personal commitment to faith in Christ alone for eternal life. Conversion or new birth indicates a fundamental "change in status from not being God's people to being God's people" (Stewart, 2011, p. 223). Conversion demands individuals to believe the gospel message and turn from their sin and self-centeredness. Dever (2005) affirmed that "fundamentally, everyone needs forgiveness. We need spiritual life. To present the gospel less radically than this is to ask for false conversions and increasingly meaningless church membership" (p. 24). Genuine converts show evidence of their belief in Jesus Christ as Savior by throwing off sin's mastery, depending totally upon Christ, and submitting obediently to the rule of Christ over their lives (Dever, 2012, pp. 58-64). Faithful church attendance, seeking heavenly treasure, and maintaining moral control over one's own body describe the practices of a genuine convert (Duggar, 1960, p. 46).

Importance of Church Membership

Leeman (2012a) defined church membership as "a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a

Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church" (p. 42). In describing membership, Leeman (2012a) indicated that "Christians do not join churches like they join clubs, they submit to them" (p. 41). Dever (2012) agreed and viewed a Christian's submission to church as demonstrative of one's submission to Jesus (p. 82). For Minatrea (2004), a high threshold of expectations for church membership added value to church membership (p. 37). Regenerate church membership remains important to Baptist ecclesiology and begins with a church's affirmation of an individual's profession of faith (Cobb, 1954, pp. 30, 36; Hammett, 2005, p. 82; Hemphill & James, 2011, p. 86; Jackson, 1986, p. 33; Leeman, 2012b, p. 85; Lunceford, n. d., p. 27). Church membership requires spiritual birth and mandates repentance from sin (Cobb, 1954, pp. 29-32). For Hammett (2005), "the very idea of the church as the called-out ones presupposes that the members of the church have heard and responded to God's call" (p. 83). Rainer (2013) agreed that the Bible clearly expects believers to connect in membership with a specific church in a specific context (p. 72).

BMA authors considered Baptist church membership both a privilege and responsibility. Johnson (1998) encouraged active church membership for disciples (p. 34). Jackson (1986), a founding father of the BMA and former BMA Seminary Professor of Theology, considered church membership a matter of primary importance due to the significance of its honor and responsibilities. Church membership brings believers into challenges associated with Christian living and serves as a means to demonstrate identity with Christ and to bear his cross (p. 23). The significance of church membership comes from the dignity and honor of affiliation with the greatest of all institutions, one

dedicated with the blood of Christ, and divinely authorized to carry out Christ's commission. Membership implies concern for meeting the obligations entailed with it such as a devotion to church as priority above the world, church attendance, financial support, ministering to the needs of others, and winning the lost (Jackson, 1986, pp. 23-26). Lunceford (n. d.) believed that members of BMA churches hold responsibility to serve in the ministry of their churches, participate in worship, and gain understanding of the basic BMA doctrines (pp. 36-71).

Admittedly, the biblical record does not specifically refer to membership or the formal joining of individuals to a church. In contrast to traditional Baptist views regarding the importance of church membership, all the Churches of Christ in Christian Union churches in Hux's (2011) research considered membership "nonessential to the overall concept and process of assimilation and discipleship" as it related to new believers (p. 91). Dever (2012) also acknowledged the absence of such terms as membership and joining in the Bible but recognized that in the New Testament "it was unthinkable for a person to be a Christian and not be a member of a church" (p. 79). Likewise, Whitney (1996) noted several things in the Bible that he believed make sense only within a context of church membership such as church discipline, pastoral oversight, and spiritual leadership along with providing a place for believers to use their spiritual gifts, participate in balanced ministry, and encourage new believers to commit to church (pp. 43-57). Church membership is necessary for biblical accountability (Pearle, 2009, p. 53) and requires individuals to incorporate in practical ways into Christ's body by journeying with others "as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home" (Dever, 2005, p. 39). Hemphill and James (2011) encouraged

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readers not to underestimate both the biblical and practical values of church membership for assimilation purposes (pp. 51-52). An ability to close the proverbial back door necessitates stable church members connected with each other for the long-term (Stetzer & Dodson, 2007, p. 130).

<div align="center">**Importance of Baptism**</div>

Baptism does not provide an outward cleansing that leads to salvation but rather plays an inward role in pointing to a new birth and the beginning of one's relationship to God (Iorg, 2011, p. 76; Stewart, 2011, p. 224).

Importance of Baptism in BMA Writings

The BMA's formal doctrinal statement defined baptism as "the immersion in water of a believer as a confession of his faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:4) and is prerequisite to church membership and participation in the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:41, 42)" (Hudgens, 2012, p. 47). The importance of immersion rests in its symbolization of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Cobb, 1954, pp.107-114; Duggar, 1960, pp. 25-26; Hammett, 2005, p. 274; Pearle, 2009, p. 63; Silvey, 1975, pp. 7, 13; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 22; Williams, 1970, p. 17; Zwafford, 1983, p. 69). The fact that Jesus Christ received public baptism set an example for all believers to follow (Jones, 1965, p. 47; Williams, 1970, p. 15). Jones (1965) stressed the importance of baptism for believers "not in order to receive the remission of sins, but because they had received the remission of sins" (p. 52). Cobb (1954), author of the definitive church manual for BMA Baptists, agreed that baptism serves to declare the fact of one's remission of sins without actually remitting those sins (p. 43). Being baptized declares one's freedom from the law "and that we are children of God by faith in Christ" (Jones, 1965, p. 55).

BMA authors described the importance of baptism by stressing it as an essential qualification for church membership, accomplishing the Great Commission, and Christian obedience. Cobb (1954) believed "there can be no membership in a church without one's being baptized" and that the Great Commission prioritizes disciple making first and baptism second (p. 38). For BMA authors, scriptural churches alone possess the authority to baptize (Cobb, 1954, p. 117; Silvey, 1975, p. 7). Jackson (1986) agreed that baptism serves as "a primary condition of church membership only as it presupposes the subject's regeneration and profession of faith in Christ" (p. 34). Cottrell (1973) emphasized that "the church is not commissioned to baptize men indiscriminately; she is to be most severely discriminate. Only those who are saved can be baptized by the church" (p. 74). Duggar (1960) agreed that only saved individuals qualify for baptism because "only a person who is dead to sin and ready for burial is to be baptized" (p. 27). Jackson (1986) also held to the premise that baptism "is the first act of Christian obedience after one's profession" (p. 34). Silvey (1975) agreed that the Great Commission "assumes that all who believe (who are disciples) will be baptized. To be saved is to have a desire to follow the will of Him who saved" and cautioned non baptized believers to question the legitimacy of their conversions (p. 7). Referring to baptism, Cobb (1954) emphasized that "no service of a believer is acceptable to Christ until the first public declarative act is performed" (p. 39).

Importance of Baptism in non-BMA Writings

Baptism openly identifies a new believer with Christ and obeys the command of Christ (Leeman, 2012b, p. 89; Whitney, 1996, p. 32). Pearle (2009) stressed that serious Christians view baptism as essential rather than optional for church members (p. 59).

When new believers submit to baptism, they express belief in important biblical truths

regarding the Trinity, regeneration, and unity with Christ's death and resurrection

(Whitney, 1996, pp. 32-39).

> Baptism is a church ordinance commanded by Christ (Matthew 28:19). If you
>
> have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you should present yourself to a
>
> local church as a candidate for baptism. By this means you will openly identify
>
> yourself as a follower of Christ and a member of His body. (Whitney, 1996, p. 55)

The early church opened its fellowship only to those "who accepted the proclamation of

Jesus as Messiah, repented, and received water baptism" (Ladd, 1974, p. 387). Christ

connected disciple making and baptism in his Great Commission (Dunahoo, 2005, p.

16). Detter (1989) pointed to the integration of new believers into the life of a local

church via baptism and teaching as the essence of the Great Commission (pp. 29-30).

Iorg (2011) agreed that "while baptism signifies entry into a new lifestyle, the primary

means a church uses to develop disciples is teaching" (p. 76).

Defining Assimilation

Descriptions of assimilation cover a wide range from simply keeping new

members and converts engaged in church attendance to seeing them reach maximum

participation in a church's ministry by learning and ministering.

Active Involvement in Church

The proverbial closing of the back door may be described as simply keeping

members in the church, active and fulfilled (Rainer, 1993, p. 281). People gain entrance

into the front door of a church by biological growth, transfer of membership, or

conversion (McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 9-10). Individuals exit the back door through

death, transfer, or reversion. McIntosh (2006) defined assimilation as "recognizing each person's unique gifts, talents, and personality, and helping him or her make friends and find a place to belong and serve" while not requiring the individual to lose his or her personal identity or personhood (p. 166). Mims (1994) added that assimilation brings new believers into the active life of a local church where they learn to live for Christ, fellowship, and minister (p. 103). Warren (1995) described assimilation as "the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church" (p. 309). Similarly, Hatmaker (2011) called for churches to move people from passive participation to proactive ministry (p. 103). Hemphill and James (2011) identified the church's goal to move individuals through sequential stages from outside the church toward fellow followership of Jesus (p. 43).

Full Integration in Church

McKinney (1993) stressed that the assimilation process was not complete until a new member's full integration and active participation in ministry to others occurred within the church (p. 90). Durey (2002) agreed that assimilation requires the involvement of new believers in actual ministry. Following the commitment of new believers to Christ and the church, the final step of assimilation occurs when they "take the responsibility and stewardship of personal ministry" (p. 3). Church leaders in Durey's (2002) research described fully assimilated members "as fully devoted followers of Christ who possessed a heart for God and sought to maintain, rather than develop, spiritual habits and disciplines" (p. 113). Dever (2005) viewed church membership as a means for new believers to identify themselves with a particular church and declare their intentions of committed attendance, giving, prayer, and service to both the pastor and

other members (pp. 35-36). According to Dunahoo (2005), "an effective disciple of Christ is one who understands the Word in the context of his or her circumstances and understands what is taking place in the world in light of God's Word" (pp. 118-119). Klauck (1996) defined assimilation as "a process by which a congregation welcomes, receives, and incorporates diverse individuals into its unique family of believers" (p. 30).

Retention, Disciple Making, and Ministry in Church

Rushing (2007) distinguished between retention and assimilation by defining retention as the simple conservation of the results of those evangelized as church members, or keeping new converts as church members. Rushing identified retention strategies as "those methods used to inform new Christians and new church members about Christian doctrine and church life to increase the conservation of evangelistic efforts" (p. 12). Rushing indicated that assimilation required two components: the retention of new members and disciple making (pp. 13-14). Kim (2005) referred to assimilation as the incorporation of new converts into a church's fellowship for the purpose of nurturing them toward responsible church membership (p. 244). Assimilation includes more than evangelism or conversion. Hunter (2009) referred to the special need for new disciples to follow Christ and incorporate into the community of Christ (p. 5). T. L. Anderson (1992) considered the incorporation of new members a sign of a healthy church (p. 135).

Rainer's (2001) research affirmed that "new Christians make one point perfectly clear. Get them involved in ministry and they are much more likely to stay" (p. 124). Lorick (2013) agreed that when those new in the faith "experience serving in the church context, many times they fall in love with being used by God" (p. 114). Allowing new

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believers to experience service through the church requires a reproducible process willing to release others for ministry rather than creating an environment of codependency (Hatmaker, 2011, pp. 103-111; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007, p. 215). Without such a process, the hope for making disciple makers fatally diminishes the results Christ intended (Hatmaker, 2011, p. 111; Willard, 2008, p. 11). Cottrell (1973) believed that Christians experience genuine happiness when they become involved in implementing the total program, plan, and procedures of the church (p. 53). Dempsey (2008) called for the complete surrender of converts to Christ by committing to the practice of spiritual disciplines in community "and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission" (p. 112).

Obligation of Churches to Assimilate

Jesus Christ charged disciples in the church to reproduce other disciples and established the essential task of the church (Kim, 2005, p.41; Lorick, 2013, p. 112; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 15). The gravity of the church's responsibilities to assimilate new converts rests primarily in the eternal significance of the issues at stake (Cobb, 2003, p. 185; Hemphill & James, 2011, p. 48).

BMA Response to Assimilation

In 2005, the BMA established a Coordinating Council to support the association's departments and agencies through vision casting and cooperative efforts to accomplish the association's overall purpose. The BMA's purpose included the mandate that BMA departments would seek to inspire missions and "assist each local church in carrying out the Great Commission" (Hudgens, 2011, pp. 50-56). The council, which consisted of national officers and executive directors of the association, determined that the

association lacked a process for developing the practice of spiritual disciplines and changing the lives of new converts. In 2009, the council considered how the association might help pastors and their congregations by formulating "a united effort to develop a discipleship process to assist pastors in their quest to make disciples in the local church" (Crawley, 2012, pp. 56-57). The council's efforts resulted in the production of a ministry tool named *DiscipleWay: 7 Disciplines for Maturing in Christ* (Crawley, 2012, pp. 57-58; Cooper, 2012).

Non-BMA Responses to Assimilation

Cobb (2003) recognized the obligation of churches to evangelize and the importance of assisting each church member to cultivate Christian discipline in both the home and throughout the world (pp. 180-185). Growing churches make the assimilation of people into the life and ministry of the church a priority and remind each person of the church's need and desire for him or her to work in the church (Herring, 1996, pp. 4, 29). Cobb (2003) encouraged churches to use Christian education and training in personal ministry to help members mature in Christ via spiritual gift discovery, prayer, Bible study, and personal witnessing (pp. 180-181). Donahue and Gladen (2010) agreed that while learners have a responsibility to learn, educators in the church have the responsibility to create learning environments that help learners to engage the truth (p. 36). Likewise, Leeman (2012b) declared that church membership "is all about a church taking specific responsibility for you, and you for a church" (p. 65).

Churches should seek the retention of members "because Christian people care about the spiritual well-being of fellow members" (Harre, 1984, p. 30). Motivated by a burden to help individuals experience the Christian life, McIntosh and Martin (1992)

conducted research by listening to pastors and observing people enter and exit church. They concluded that churches have an obligation to assist individuals when they experience new life in Christ by training and equipping them "in the process of sanctification so that they will experience the fulfillment that Christ so wants us to enjoy" (p. 8). Five items emerged that McIntosh and Martin (1992) considered helpful to assimilating individuals: friendship, tasks/roles, small groups, identification, and spiritual growth (pp. 75-135).

The findings of Hux's (2011) research included the discovery that churches with intentionally designed plans, processes, and procedures for the assimilation and discipleship of new converts demonstrated the most effectiveness at attaining such goals (p. 85). Additionally, Hux found that churches believed formal classes helped in keeping members and placed most responsibility on the new convert's desire to assimilate (p. 86). Warren (1995) stressed the church's responsibility "to take the initiative in assimilating new people into the congregation" (p. 311). Churches have an obligation to assist individuals when they experience new life in Christ by training and equipping them "in the process of sanctification so that they will experience the fulfillment that Christ so wants us to enjoy" (McIntosh & Martin, 1992, p. 8).

Moyer (1994) said that asking, "What about those who do sincerely come to the Savior? How can new believers be assimilated into the life and activities of the local church?" asks questions not asked by the New Testament. Instead, "it is far more important to ask how the *church* can enter the lives of new believers and help them than it is to ask how *they* can help the church and its program. 'Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve' (Mark 10:45)" (p. 340). While difficult to argue with

Moyer's point-of-view regarding questions related to assimilation, since the Bible does not ask such questions, most authors in the literature would agree that serving others should become a goal for maturing new believers. Moyer's basic assumption is more palatable; churches attempting to keep their numbers up rather than seeking the spiritual maturity and welfare of new converts falls short of biblical intentions. Dunahoo (2005) clearly saw the church's responsibility for active and intentional engagement in disciple making based upon its authority to baptize (p. 230).

Need for Intentional Spiritual Growth

Healthy churches create cultures founded upon the spiritual growth of their members. Such cultures prevent new believers from becoming lifelong baby Christians and help them to become like Jesus (Dever, 2012, p. 101; Donahue & Gladen, 2010, p. 34; Samra, 2003, p. 222).

Creating Cultures of Intentional Spiritual Growth

Roberts (2008) called for church leaders to turn converts into disciples by creating a culture of transformation and behavioral change rather than the simple passing along of information (p. 148). Such spiritual growth requires local churches to set about the intentional creation of such followers of Christ (Dempsey, 2008, p. 113; Hull, 1990, p. 205; Rainer & Geiger, 2006, p. 148). McKinney (1993) touted an assimilation process that recognized the need for church intentional and specific assistance in moving newcomers toward active participation (p. 87). The process required steps for educating, enfolding, enabling, and evaluating each new member's progress (McKinney, 1993, pp. 86-89). For Waggoner (2008), the definition of discipleship mandated an intentional process of moving believers toward spiritual maturity and the emphatic understanding

that Christ required his church to produce disciples (p. 14). Gallagher and Newton's (2009) sociological study of concepts, means, and objectives of spiritual growth across conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and emerging church congregations found that "churches with strong and clear core messages of spiritual growth cultivate stronger congregational commitments" (p. 232). Dunahoo (2005) acknowledged that three decades of unintentional discipleship centered less on God than man (p. 6) and defined the role of churches for disciple making as helping individuals understand and apply truth to everyday life and events (p. 98).

Shirley (2008) defined spiritual formation as "the sanctification or transformation that happens during the process of intentional discipleship" (p. 211); however, the review of literature revealed a lack of intentionality on the part of churches to assimilate new converts. Without clear intentions, churches often fail to develop new converts in areas of spiritual growth, formation, and leadership (Milburn, 2007, p. 92). For example, Lowe (2011) acknowledged an obvious retention problem and concluded that many churches lack "active, well-designed, intentional plans to accomplish spiritual growth" (p. 1). Developing leaders should provide an essential focus of new convert assimilation and spiritual growth. Moyer (1994) promoted the idea of individual spiritual maturity and suggested, "It is a goal that eventually enables him to become a leader in a local church teaching others how to live for Christ" (p. 347). Kennedy (1996) also encouraged spiritual maturity and recognized that "until you have done everything possible to develop your disciple into a vital, reproducing member of the local church, your responsibilities are not fulfilled" (p. 104). The key to disciples emerging as leaders requires intentional, relational, learned, and repeatable processes (Crawley, 2012, p. 61;

Collinson, 2005, p. 242; Putman, 2010, p. 35). For Dunahoo (2005), life-transformation necessitates intentional processes that cannot be limited to pulpit or haphazard approaches to discipleship (p. xi).

Results of Non-intentional Spiritual Growth

In contrast to developing new converts intentionally, churches often resort to creating complex ministries and excessive activity to enhance assimilation. Rainer and Rainer (2008) described complex churches as anemic and lacking the intentionality to craft meaningful relationships between church members. They identified excessive activity as the reason for complex church inability to do anything else intentionally (p. 147). As a result, such churches lacked both coherent purpose and a clear process for disciple making (p. 6). Similarly, Osborne (2008) believed that "most churches give the back door scant attention . . . we've become so focused on *reaching* people that we've forgotten the importance of *keeping* people" (p. 13). For Osborne (2008), the church's back door required an intentional slamming shut (p. 15). The lack of intentionality used to generate spiritual growth may require churches to repent (Wilhoit, 2008, p. 14). According to Oswald and Leas (1987), a formal assimilation process requires a system designed to utilize the dynamics of varied congregational sizes as described in their work. Each church size demonstrates strengths or weaknesses for helping strangers acquaint themselves with the church and grow spiritually (p. 36); however, Osborne (2008) believed that effective principles of assimilation applied to both small and large churches (pp. 21-22).

When churches fail to make intentional efforts for developing new converts spiritually, they abandon them "to fend for themselves, hoping they get the proper

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nourishment for spiritual growth" (Craig & Wooten, n.d., p. 5). Similarly, Cole (2005) recognized the tendency of churches to tell new converts that they are "helpless, needy, and unable to fend for themselves" (p. 131). As a result, new converts depend upon other believers to nourish, protect, and train them rather than looking to God for such provisions. Cole (2005) described the reality, "We now have a church full of baby geese, with their mouths wide open every Sunday waiting to be fed" (p. 131). In contrast to leaving new converts as spiritual infants, the biblical writer of Hebrews 5:11-14 admonished readers to pursue the spiritual transformation of new converts and compared immature believers to infants needing to grow and develop beyond milk to solid food (Waggoner, 2008, p. 31).

Measuring Spiritual Maturity

One possible measure of spiritual maturity regards attendance and participation as essential. For example, participants in Hux's (2011) research considered church attendance as the most reliable measure of assimilation. Actual membership held little importance (p. 86). Discipleship and spiritual growth can go unnoticed and downplayed in a local church due to the difficulty of measuring it (Lorick, 2013, p. 112; Osborne, 2008, p. 13; Yount, 1996, p. 28). Gallagher and Newton (2009) offered the following baseline definition of spiritual growth: "Spiritual growth is a process that involves an expanding assessment and mastery of one's religious narrative and attachment to one's tradition expressing itself through greater participation in corporate and private worship and institutional involvement" (p. 237).

In contrast, Waggoner (2008) believed that when ministerial leaders measure success in statistical or numeric terms such as attendance, budget, quality facilities, or

number of programs, rather than by the most critical issue of spiritual transformation, they miss the most important metrics for determining success (p. xiii). Likewise, Lowe (2011) recommended that replicators of his project make effort to ensure that a church possesses a genuine Great Commission mindset concerned for spiritual growth rather than increased attendance figures (p. 65). Dever (2012) promoted healthy church growth that grows members biblically and "not just numbers" (p. 101). Waggoner (2008) concluded:

> No one expects a new convert to understand fully all the Bible's essential teachings. However, we can legitimately expect that, within a reasonable period of time, a Christian will learn and embrace the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. Far too many churchgoers hang around the Christian faith for long periods of time without making appropriate advances in their knowledge of God's word. (p. 31)

McIntosh and Martin (1992) identified spiritual growth as a key to assimilation (pp. 118-135). Deeper levels of discipleship enhance the likelihood of assimilation and admonish church leaders to provide opportunities for the spiritual growth of all members (Rainer, 1993, p. 283). New Christians need the church to support and guide them toward spiritual maturity (Mims, 1994, p. 72). Mead (1991) urged the future church "to be more intentional in formation of its laity" (p. 49) by offering intensive training for new believers that concentrates on basics of the faith with less assumption regarding what people know (pp. 50-52). Robinson (n. d.) described the ministry vision for Operation Multiplication's Lead Church Strategy as a means of producing spiritual multiplication by assisting Christians "to biblically invest in the lives of new believers

and other growing new church members. Those discipled are prepared to enjoy a lifestyle of spiritual growth, daily witness, and New Testament disciple-making" (p. 1). Steinke (2006) also recognized that investment in the growth of people characterizes healthy congregations (p. 34). Spiritual formation should advance church members beyond mere therapeutic devotional lives to the seeking and doing of God's will (Hunter, 2009, p. 8).

Importance of Spiritual Disciplines

Discipleship is the principal mission of the church and all functions of the church, such as worship, evangelism, teaching, ministry missions, and fellowship, serve to accomplish the making of authentic disciples (McIntosh, 2006, pp. 176-177; Shirley, 2008, p. 216). The importance of the Great Commission is at the heart of the mission for followers of Christ and his churches. Keener (2009) concluded that, "the Great Commission is not an idea tacked inelegantly to the end of Matthew's Gospel, as if Matthew had nowhere else to put it. Rather, it summarizes the heart of this Gospel's message" (p. 19) and challenges believers to devote their lives to fulfilling the commands of Christ. Christ commanded the church to make disciples from all people groups "by winning lost people to Christ, incorporating new converts into the fellowship of the church (1 Cor 12:13), and building them to become fully matured, responsible, and useful Christians within the fellowship of the church" (Kim, 2005, p. 1). Lorick (2013) agreed that Jesus "charged us to reproduce other disciples. As pastors and leaders, we must ensure the intentional discipleship of new believers" (p. 112).

The review of literature affirmed certain disciplines such as Bible reading, study, meditation, prayer, community, church attendance, evangelism, training, multiplication, worship, service, guidance, and stewardship as essential for spiritual growth (Cobb,

2003, pp. 180-181; Cooper, 2012, pp. 9-321; Gallagher & Newton, 2009, pp. 250-254; Hanks, 2009b, pp. 13-139; Hunneshagen, 2002, p. 192; Kennedy, 1996, p. 106; Terry, 1993, p. 25; Thoman, 2010, pp. 31-32). Sources varied in their presentations and terminologies for most disciplines, but the seven disciplines of Bible, prayer, worship, giving, witnessing, serving, and leading, surveyed by Rainer et al. (2010), appeared throughout the literature reviewed. The outward expressions of discipleship emphasized personal relationships with both God and others, increased knowledge, Christlike character, greater participation in community by attending church, holiness expressed through Bible study, prayer, humility, and self-denial (Fortosis, 2001, p. 284; Gallagher & Newton, 2009, pp. 258-259; Grams, 2004, pp. 116-120; Holt, 2009, p. 170; Neufeld, 2009, pp. 179-202).

The literature also promoted the need for churches to assist new converts and church members in discovering their spiritual gifts (Cobb, 2003, pp. 180-181; Collinson, 2005, pp. 245, 250; Dempsey, 2008, p. 113; Gauntt, 1986, pp. 12-16; Hull, 1990, p. 159; Johnson, 1998, pp. 41-42; Laurie, 1999, pp. 153-156; Rainer, 2001, p. 112; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007, p. 130). Every believer possesses a spiritual gift (Gauntt, 1986, pp. 12-16). When churches help laypersons identify their unique spiritual gifts and equip them through a mentoring relationship, ministerial leaders gain additional time for their ministries and laypersons gain the enjoyment of clear and passionate ministry (Scott, 2001, Abstract). McKinney (1993) believed that God calls all members to serve and that they "should be directed toward areas where their special gifts will be used. Gift-driven means helping a person discover his or her spiritual giftedness, then matching the gift with a corresponding ministry" (p. 83). Carrying the idea further, Dunahoo (2005)

promoted intentional communication that serving the Lord with spiritual gifts exceeds

their use as "not merely a Sunday activity or reserved for church professionals. It is a

daily process for all of God's people" (p. 43).

Need for Immediate Assimilation

Several sources indicated a need for giving immediate attention to new members

as part of the intentional assimilation process (Craig & Wooten, n.d. p. 13; Hemphill &

James, 2011, p. 31; Hux, 2011, p. 88; McDowell, 1963, p. 179; McKinney, 1993, p. 90;

Nolan, 2004, p. 180; Rainer, 1999, p. 24; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007, p. 122). Durey (2002)

suggested from the findings of his research that churches utilize an intentional track for

spiritual formation (p. 142). Allowing time to lapse before assimilating a new convert

into the church has no scriptural basis, forfeits a new convert's best interest, and neglects

the fraternal character of the church (McDowell, 1963, p. 179). Therefore, quick follow

up is critical to incorporating new members into the fellowship (McKinney, 1993, p. 90).

Nolan (2004) observed from the consensus of his research that "decline in church

attendance and growth in inactivity was directly related to inadequate discipleship

immediately following a new believer's conversion" (p. 180).

Church leaders who seize upon a new believer's peak motivation by equipping

and developing spiritual growth skills early can help the convert avoid the risk of

spiritual decline into mediocrity (Craig & Wooten, n.d., p. 13). According to Lawless

(2005), "pastors in our study told us that members are often most excited—and most

open to getting involved in the church—*when they first join*" (p. 43). Beginning the

assimilation process prior to a prospective member's decision to join a church can

enhance assimilation. Early assimilation should normally involve actions that allow for

two-way communication between the prospect and a church member (Rainer, 1999, p. 24). At least one new convert agreed with the need for immediate assimilation by describing the benefits of his church's policy to get new believers quickly involved in assimilation (Hux, 2011, p. 88). When churches procrastinate in assimilating new believers, they increase the attrition rate (Hanks, 1993, p. 101). Getting new members involved in service while the "fire is still hot" acts to prevent later trends of non involvement (Lawless, 2005, p. 43).

Hanks (2012) reported the findings of the three-year Lead Church Strategy's pilot testing. The testing included 500 new members who met weekly with mature church members for nine to 12 months to review sermons, memorize scripture, and pray for evangelistic opportunities. Of significant interest to ministerial leaders, Hanks reported that 90% of individuals beginning the nine to 12 month process within a week of joining the church, by transfer or conversion, were prepared to continue the process with others after completion. The success rates declined to 70% of new members being prepared to repeat the process if they began within two weeks of joining the church and dropped to 30% if new members began the process within three weeks of joining the church. The researcher discovered a contradiction between the data Hanks reported in 1993 and in 2012. Hanks (1993) reported that 400 new believers over the age of 15 (p. 100) made up the study rather than the 500 he spoke of in 2012 (Hanks, 2012). Nevertheless, the percentages remained consistent and promoted the need for immediate assimilation.

New Converts and Evangelistic Outreach

The immediate involvement of new converts in evangelistic outreach encourages assimilation. Donahue and Gladen (2010) noted the common belief in evangelical

churches that many believers lose non-Christian friends as time goes by (p. 26). New believers can help the church to think more about caring for the homeless community and those near death (Hoffman, 2011, pp. 20-21). Hunter (2009) determined that new converts often provide opportunities for intentional, deliberate, and ongoing efforts to evangelize because "they have not yet had time to become linguistically corrupted by theologians and preachers; they still understand and speak the language of the secular marketplace" (p. 62). Powell (1991) warned that unless attended to "the newly-saved may quickly settle into a pew, where they sit and sour until the second coming" (p. 23). In his encouragement for a kingdom-minded model for discipleship, Dunahoo (2005) suggested that current practice generally does not communicate a kingdom concept to new Christians from the outset (p. 43). When should new Christians study theology? According to Dunahoo (2005), "we should not wait for some magic moment to incorporate this into the process. Studying theology and doctrine should be built in up-front, and permeate the entire process" (p. 82). Lunceford (n. d.), considered it "a great imperative for every new believer . . . to gain an understanding of the basic doctrines of our faith" (p. 71).

New Christians need immediate follow up because they may not grasp the full meaning of their decisions and have no idea what to do next (Lorick, 2013, p. 93; Searcy & Henson, 2009, pp. 154-155). With new believers, "focus on getting their questions answered and getting them connected. Make sure the forward momentum continues and no one falls through the cracks" (Searcy & Henson, 2009, p. 155). Church leaders can prepare for immediate assimilation efforts by answering questions related to what they want a new believer to do in the first hour after becoming a follower of Jesus, to receive

within a day of becoming a follower of Jesus, and what steps they hope he or she will take during the first month of becoming a follower of Jesus. Leaders should also affirm a plan for discipleship of the new believer (Searcy & Henson, 2009, p. 156).

New Converts and Service in Church

New converts provide a resource for churches and need immediate exposure to the concept of service within the church. Cottrell (1973) believed that "the newly born again individual should come to grips early in his Christian life with the realities of serving the Lord" (p. 42). Raney (n. d.), a BMA leader in Christian Education, concluded:

> Every new church member wants and needs to know about his church and how she carries on. . . . Every pastor wants every new member coming into the membership of his church to be able to fit in and be happily busy helping carry out the program of the church . . . . The time for a church member to start out serving and getting the joy of service in and through his church is when he first unites with that church. (Foreword)

New members often possess a unique enthusiasm and willingness to get involved in serving the church (Lawless, 2005, p. 43). Robinson (1997) encouraged the quick assimilation of each new member so that they could get "involved not only in fellowship but also in service. They should have someone to guide them into the life of the church, nurture, and disciple them" (p. 117). How does a church quickly assimilate? Robinson (1997) recommended steps to assimilate members that included immediate personal follow-up within 24 hours, writing a letter of encouragement and instruction, assigning a deacon or other member who can provide nurture, making a visit from the appropriate

Sunday school department, and hosting periodic new member receptions that provide time for getting acquainted (p. 118).

Need for Relationships and New Member Classes

New member classes provide opportunities for connecting individuals and informing them about the church. Several sources considered such classes as essential for the assimilation process (Braden, 1987, pp. 46-47; Durey, 2002, p. 96; Logan, 1989, p. 114; Magill, 1963, pp. 188-190; Morriss, 1963, pp. 185-187; Rainer, 2001, p. 115; Rainer & Geiger, 2006, p. 157; Robinson, 1997, p. 202; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007, p. 125; Warren, 1995, pp. 311-329). Lawless (2005) cited surveys conducted by the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth that "indicated the significance of membership classes in growing churches" (p. 18). Seventy-three percent of effective churches responding to surveys reported having a membership class. The survey included Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Evangelical Free, Wesleyan, and independent community churches. All 71 laypersons surveyed believed that both potential and current members could benefit from attending new member classes (Lawless, 2005, p. 21). Durey's (2002) research found that 27% of new believers attributed new believer classes as helpful to their spiritual growth. An additional 22% attributed membership and pathway classes as helpful to their spiritual growth (p. 108). Although Gallagher and Newton (2009) found that both mentoring and membership classes may contribute to an individual's greater commitment to a congregation, they also suggested the need for further research "to assess these connections within congregations, their programs for integrating new members, and the diversity of both across religious traditions" (p. 260).

Rainer (2001) called the relationship between assimilation effectiveness and new member classes amazing after referring to his study of approximately 1,000 churches on the retention rates of new church members over a two-year period. The study found a 112% retention rate for churches that required a new member class, 89% for churches expecting but not requiring such a class, and 72% for those churches offering but not requiring a new member class. Rainer (2001) credited much of the impact upon retention and assimilation to the ability of new member classes to communicate a church's high expectations (pp. 113-115). Stetzer and Dodson (2007) agreed and discovered that 53% of comeback churches, churches that revitalized after decline, used new membership classes as a means to raise membership requirements (pp. 124-125).

Content of New Member Classes

Such classes provide an intentional means by which churches can incorporate new members into the church (Braden, 1987, pp. 46-47). Classes should communicate the value of church membership, create opportunities to build relationships, and clarify personal value and expectations (Warren, 1995, pp. 311-329). Classes should also emphasize high expectations and include attention to doctrine, polity, constitutions, ordinances, discipline policies, expectations, denominational history, tithing, membership requirements, and ministry opportunities (Rainer, 2001, p. 112; Rainer & Rainer, 2008, pp. 216-217). Lawless (2005) concluded from his research that church leaders favored new member classes as a means of communicating church expectations and determined that both the actions and beliefs of church members matter (pp. 32-33). Similarly, Robinson (1997) believed that new converts particularly need to learn what it means to be a Christian and that every church should develop "some kind of new

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member orientation and assimilation plan" (p. 202).

Although not opposed to new member classes, Durey (2002) warned readers that classes for new believers can replace the relational component and become too academic (p. 47). Williams (1970), a BMA pastor, also cautioned against inviting new converts to a Sunday school class where they lacked the basic knowledge to participate coherently. Williams stated that "perhaps the greatest cause for the outrageous mortality rate among young converts is the lack of their being grounded in the fundamentals of the faith" (p. 5). Foster (2008) also stressed "that spiritual formation does not occur by direct human effort, but through a relational process whereby we receive from God the power or ability to do what we cannot do by our own effort" (p. 155). Dunahoo (2005) warned about the inadequacy of disciple making models focused upon relationships and small groups that can exclude attention to corporate worship in contrast to transformational models that focus upon content, relationships, application, service, and ministry (p. 8). Dunahoo (2005) further encouraged readers to focus upon the family nature of relationships among fellow believers as important to all of life and not limited to church alone (pp. 46-47).

Morriss (1963) described his church's intentional outreach strategy that included a 30-minute class on Sunday nights in which new members learned about doctrines, ecclesiastical distinctives, and educational programs of the church. The church also utilized an organized program of sending cards and making visits to welcome new comers (pp. 185-187). Magill (1963) indicated that his church required potential members to meet with a membership committee prior to formalizing membership. The committee presented potential members with articles of faith, church budget, and

educational literature for examination. Potential members received for baptism also received literature and visits by the pastor or a deacon prior to actual membership. Magill (1963) claimed that average enrollment and participation in his church exceeded national averages of the Southern Baptist Convention, and members attributed spiritual growth to the new member strategy (pp. 188-190). Robinson (1997) suggested that training classes vary in length from one week to six weeks and cover at least four necessary topics: the plan of salvation, basic Bible teachings and denominational distinctive, the church's strategy, and layout of the church plant and organization of programs and ministries (pp. 202-203).

Need for New Member Classes to Assure New Convert Conversion

Several authors encouraged the use of new member classes to ensure that attendees experienced genuine conversion (Herring, 1996, p. 5; Logan, 1989, p. 113; Rainer, 2001, p. 112). In fact, authors warned churches not to assume that everyone attending a newcomer class already possessed genuine conversion (Heck, 1988, p. 16; Herring, 1996, p. 4). McIntosh (2006) called for new member classes that focused upon the basics of salvation, assurance of salvation, and other initial aspects of being a follower of Christ (p. 140). Lawless (2005) concluded:

> Usually when we think of new member classes [NMC], we think of assimilation, of incorporating new believers into the church. We don't typically think of evangelism. But the NMC can be used as a powerful tool of evangelism. There were several churches in the study that used their NMC as a way to reach the lost with the gospel. This study has shown me that, if done evangelistically, a membership class can be an effective tool for leading persons to Jesus. (p. 26)

Although Klauck (1996) designed a training program to help laypersons provide both caring support and evangelical outreach to prospective, new, and renewed members of his local church (p. I), he provided negligible data by which to measure its effectiveness in assimilation. Neither did his project relate directly to the assimilation of new converts.

Opportunities for Relationship in New Member Classes

Others regarded the strength of NMCs to create relational opportunities for new converts and new church members with existing church members (Hux, 2011, p. 91; McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 75-86; Rainer, 1993, p. 282; Schaller, 1978, p. 74). Hux (2011) reported that 80% of churches in his study offered NMCs but that none considered the perspective of new members when evaluating the classes (p. 97). Schaller (1978) indicated that more than two-thirds of church members identified relationships, such as friendship or kinship, as the primary reason for their decision to join a congregation (p. 74). More recently, Hemphill and James (2011) claimed that unidentified researchers determined that 79% to 86% of church members attended their churches because a friend or relative brought them to the church (p. xvi). Hux's (2011) research found that members did not consider formal membership as important as attendance. In other words, the importance of developing relationships exceeded that of formal membership (p. 91).

Friendship with others, personal relationships, and personal care are essential for assimilating new members (Bocock, 2011, p. ii; Hunter, 2009, p. 31; McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 75-86; Rainer, 1993, p. 282; Rushing, 2007, p. 120; Yount, 1996, p. 16). New believers need love and support to feel comfortable in church. They also need help and encouragement in understanding the Bible (Laurie, 1999, p. 153; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 124).

Relationships developed in church serve as the key to successful nurture of new believers (Stutzman, 1990, p. 59). Rainer and Rainer (2008) recognized the character of essential churches to encourage long-term church relationships by ensuring the connection of new members with others in the church (p. 147).

Rainer et al. (2010) found that 31% of BMA church dropouts identified two primary reasons for their actions: never connected with anyone or hypocritical and judgmental church members. Both reasons appear relational (p. 31). Rushing (2007) recommended more emphasis upon relation building and concluded that people learn more from a person in real life than in reading a book about godly living (p. 122). Effective practices of small group leaders include relationship, care, nurture, and reproduction of leaders (Park, 2010, pp. 159-162). Hospitality at every level serves as the key to assimilation. Church members seek a friend rather than a friendly church (Hemphill & James, 2011, pp. 20-24).

McIntosh and Martin (1992) identified friendship with other members as the initial step needed for new member assimilation (pp. 75-86). God created humankind for relationship. Uniting new believers with other believers through church serves as the biblical means for church growth (McIntosh, 2003, p. 72). Rainer (1993) emphasized the need for personal relationships over programs such as the sharing of meals in one's home (p. 282). Rainer also stressed the need for new members to get involved in actual ministry as equally important to development of relationships (p. 282). By such, Rainer meant ministries that released laypersons to minister without permission of the church's positional leadership (p. 283).

Craig and Wooten (n. d.) indicated that Operation Multiplication provided an

intentional process for ensuring that new believers receive the personal care and nourishment needed to initiate spiritual growth (p. 6). Close relationships and discipleship amongst active church members can "strengthen relationships with other disciples and church members who are not strong disciples" (Johnson, 1998, p. 40). Rushing (2007) concluded that bonding because of personal care increased retention (p. 120). Scannell (2003) studied an Episcopalian congregation that used focus groups to improve new member assimilation. The study's findings concluded that intentional hospitality enhanced new member assimilation (p. 68).

Importance of Small Groups

New member classes may vary in size but the literature pointed toward the effectiveness of small groups in assimilating new believers and new church members. Discipleship does not involve mass production (Eims, 1978, p. 45; Ogden, 2003, p. 67; Park, 2010, p. 1). Putman (2010) stressed that effective disciple making required more than study of Christ's message but included consideration of how Christ made disciples. Putman proposed a process that centered upon small groups and three keys to Christ's success: intentional leadership, a relational environment, and a learnable and repeatable process (p. 35). Johnson (1998) stressed that Christ's method of discipleship involved small groups and encouraged each faithful believer to find and teach a new believer (pp. 6, 24). Issler (2012) encouraged intentional plans and efforts "to take some realistic initial steps to address our gaps on a more permanent basis, slowly chipping away at them, as we follow Jesus' example" (p. 55). For Galloway (1995), five basic reasons existed that make small groups necessary for all churches need: provides multiple points of entry into the church, effective evangelism, the only means to care for people truly,

accelerates an individual's spiritual growth, and shifts the church's work to people (p. 10).

Rainer's (1999) research revealed that 83% of new Christians involved in Sunday school remained active in church five years after joining compared to 16% of new Christians remaining active in worship only (p. 45). Interestingly, Rainer and Rainer's (2008) research reported the same figures under slightly different categories: 83% of church members involved in both worship and small groups remained active in a church five years after joining compared to 16% that attended worship only (p. 214). Regardless of specific categories, the statistics favor new Christian involvement in small groups as vital to retention (Rainer & Rainer, 2008, p. 213). Forty-four percent of successfully assimilated new believers in Durey's (2002) study rated small groups as helpful to their spiritual growth (p. 108).

Opinions Vary Regarding Small Group Size

Opinions vary as to what constitutes a small group. For example, some preferred to see a small group include only one-on-one numbers. In section four of his work, Robinson (n. d.) observed that new believers tend to be more honest and open when only their disciple making friend hears the discussion (p. 5). In contrast, others such as Ogden (1999) considered a triad of three or four participants as the optimum size for a small discipleship group (p. 10). Johnson (2012) agreed with Ogden (1999) and recorded that the BMA's *DiscipleWay* process depended upon small groups limited to a maximum of four people at a time (p. 77). Hull (1990) considered one-on-one small groups inadequate because no one can fully disciple another (p. 35). For Ogden (1999), the benefits of a triad included less pressure on the disciple to serve as the center of all information and

insight, the relational rather than hierarchical nature of a triad, and the wisdom of numbers (pp. 10-11). Ogden (2003) more simply identified three ingredients for effective triads: relational transparency, the truth of God's Word, and life-change accountability (p. 199). Likewise, small groups allow a leader to be more authentic, listen, pray personally, and model a relationship with God (Johnson, 2012, p. 77).

Park's (2010) qualitative research explored what made lay small groups effective in fostering spiritual growth among Korean Americans. The research defined small group as two or more in a face-to-face relationship that generally comprised a range of 3 to 12 participants. Park also concluded that scholars and practitioners agreed that discipleship training occurred best in small groups (pp. 1-6). Nolan (2004) determined that while large group worship opens wide the front door, "small groups and one-on-one will tightly close the back door" (p. 179). According to Durey (2002), a major finding of his research was that 67% of the 15 churches studied used small groups or cell groups to provide for the spiritual growth and follow-up of new converts and new members. Twenty percent of churches studied used small groups exclusively for new believers (p. 95).

Varied Small Group Strategies

In an effort to retain people through genuine relations and authentic discipleship, Rose (2009) developed a plan that used small groups in his church. According to Rose, the small groups "motivated and challenged people inside and outside of the church to participate in fellowship opportunities" (p. xi). Following the project's development, average attendance increased by 9% between 2007 and 2008, the number of adult small groups increased by 300%, and the number of adult disciples increased by 54.5% (p.

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133). Though Rose's (2009) project did not regard new converts exclusively, he concluded that "the church rediscovered biblical values, recovered its mission, and, as a result, reproduced disciples through the power of small groups" (p. 134). Rose admitted the non-scientific nature of his study and suggested that future research perform such analysis; however, he did conclude that the findings affirmed the ability of small groups to break growth barriers, establish the capacity to create community, to produce personal growth, and to evangelize the unchurched (pp. 139-141).

Several authors presented more details related to the specific actions and strategies they used in small groups. The strategic process used by Operation Multiplication (OM) creates relationships by connecting a new church member, known as a Timothy, with a disciple maker, known as a Paul. Each Timothy and Paul completes two OM resources, Hanks (2009a) and Hanks (2009b), in one-on-one meetings. The former includes eight sessions that focus upon encouraging the believer. The latter includes 17 sessions that focus upon establishing the believer. Ideally, each Timothy anticipates becoming well equipped through the process to serve as a future Paul for the purpose of disciple making. The final step expects every Paul, those who have completed the two OM resources, to continue disciple making by rejoining the assimilation strategy at the second step and leading a new Timothy through the final step (Craig & Wooden, n. d., p. 50-53; Hanks & Craig, 2007, pp. ix-xiv).

Small Groups that Reproduce

Similarly, Putman's (2010) strategy focused on what should happen in the life of every Christian and small group within a church (p. 11). For Putman, the answer called for churches to train disciples in small groups who become knowledgeable of how to

disciple others through "real relationships, real authenticity, real teaching, and thus real discipleship" (pp. 12, 35). Putman recognized three primary keys to Christ's approach and success: intentional leadership, a relational environment, and a learned and repeatable process (p. 35) and specified the common stages of a disciple's growth: spiritually dead, spiritual infancy, spiritual childhood, spiritual young adulthood, and spiritual parenthood (p. 41). Putman (2010) interpreted Christ's process for discipleship as one that required leaders to share, connect, minister, and disciple (pp. 89-137). Putman, Willis, Guindon, and Krause (2010) utilized Bible storying as their primary method for making disciples. The method refers to the oral telling of biblically-based stories according to chronological order, themes, and needs of the audience (p. 195).

Cole's (2005) Life Transformation Groups (LTG) consisted of two to three non-coeds meeting weekly for the purpose of challenging each other to live authentically spiritual lives. Participants sought accountability, mutual confession of sin, read extensive amounts of scripture, and prayed for the lost (p. 27). LTG leaders hope to build upon momentum generated inside the groups and experience a multiplication of LTGs (Cole, 2005, pp. 27-28). Ogden's (1999) study format also called for weekly meetings in one-and-one-half-hour sessions that covered a core truth, memory verse, inductive Bible study, and assigned reading with prayer weaved throughout (pp. 12-13). The 24 studies covered issues related to growing up in Christ, understanding the message of Christ, becoming like Christ, and serving Christ (Ogden, 1999, pp. 17-220).

Osborne (2008) encouraged sermon-based small groups to create a structure that consistently connected people with both the Bible and significant relationships (p. 43). For Osborne, such small groups provide a simple and natural assimilation process that

creates easy connecting points for friendships within the church (p. 35). Sermon-based

groups build home studies around a discussion of the previous weekend's sermon. Each

meeting includes refreshments, questions related to attendees, the Bible, and application

(Osborne, 2008, pp. 60, 88-89). Osborne pastors the North Coast Church in northern San

Diego County. Since 1985, the church's small group participation includes an average

80% of adults who attended weekend services. Numerical growth also increased slowly

but principles apply to both small and large churches (pp. 21-22). According to Osborne,

"It took five years to go from 130 to 180. It took another five years to reach 750" (p. 23).

Leadership is Critical

Developing leaders should provide an essential focus of new convert assimilation

and spiritual growth. Moyer (1994) promoted the idea of individual spiritual maturity

and suggested "it is a goal that eventually enables him to become a leader in a local

church teaching others how to live for Christ" (p. 347). Shenk and Stutzman (1988)

agreed with the importance of leadership and expressed that the purpose of all leadership

functions in the church involve the empowerment of each congregational member for

ministry (p. 169). McKinney (1993) stressed that the assimilation process did not

complete until a new member's full integration and active participation in ministry to

others occurred within the church (p. 90). Durey (2002) agreed that assimilation requires

the involvement of new believers into actual ministry. Following the commitment of new

believers to Christ and the church, the final step of assimilation occurs when they "take

the responsibility and stewardship of personal ministry" (p. 3). Steinke (2006) viewed

leadership as the ruin or salvation of a congregation (p. 105).

Importance of Pastoral Leadership

A pastor's ability to generate enthusiasm serves as the key to healthy churches and assimilation of newcomers (Oswald & Leas, 1987, pp. 17, 25, 28). Lorick (2013) called pastors and leaders to recognize Christ's charge to reproduce other disciples, "we must ensure the intentional discipleship of new believers. We can't lead them to Christ and baptize them merely to gain the praise of men" (p. 112). Stetzer and Dodson (2007) agreed that leadership must be proactive, shared, and developed (pp. 39-50). Hatmaker (2011) encouraged a reproducible process through which leaders willingly let go and release others for ministry. When churches neglect to release others they kill "our hope of becoming disciples who make disciples" (pp. 110-111). Biblical servant leaders must possess both doxological motivation and divine agenda. Such motivation demonstrates a passion for God's honor and a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of others. Divine agenda refers to the accomplishment of God's mandate to make disciples of all nations by being faithful stewards and taking the initiative as servant-leaders (Howell, 2003, p. 301).

Importance of Trained Clergy

Mead (1991) believed it essential for a well-trained clergy capable of supporting and training others in the ministry (pp. 53-54). Capable leaders must possess spiritual maturity, ability to listen to others, and devotion to learning. For example, Scott's (2001) study suggested that assimilation can take place quickly and effectively but depends upon the clergy staff having the time required to train, equip, and mentor the laity. By equipping laypersons for leadership, leaders can gain the time needed (Abstract). Hull (1988) considered the lack of good lay leadership within churches a great weakness (pp.

31-32). Investing in the growth of people reflects healthy congregations and "healthy congregations will have leaders devoted to learning" (Steinke, 2006, p, 34).

Roberts (2008) agreed with the need for leaders who demonstrate both spiritual maturity and ability to listen. For Roberts (2008), "spiritual maturity comes from deep reflection and meditation on God's Word. It is never static; it is always moving in one direction or the other. Spiritual maturity is dependent on our ability to sit still and listen" (p. 164). Christ exemplified effective leadership by enlisting the Twelve, informing them of the need, asking them to follow Him, and equipping them through instruction and experiential learning. Pastors, church staff, and lay leaders need to develop effective enlisting people skills via prayer, information, membership surveys, asking individuals, presenting challenges and explaining requirements, securing commitment, training, and staying positive (Robinson, 1997, pp. 99-100).

Similarities between the Development of Discipleship and Leadership

Recommended criteria for effective discipleship appeared in the literature more so than did criteria for effective leadership development. The researcher's analysis determined that similarities existed between discipleship and leadership development. In essence, the development of leaders required certain elements of discipleship. Kim (2005) recognized the need for effective discipleship and leadership development as critical to conversion church growth and fulfilling the Great Commission (p. 246). Effective discipleship included an emphasis upon hands-on teaching that advanced learners beyond mere learning in the cognitive domain to learning in the affective and psychomotor domains (Holt, 2009, p. 2; Park, 2010, p. 70; Sirles, 2009, p. 53; Yount, 1996, p. 44). The training must be relational (Issler, 2010, p. 372; Putman, 2010, p. 35;

Shirley, 2008, p. 215). Putman (2010) stressed the need for an intentional, relational, and learned and repeatable process (p. 35). Park (2010) stressed the most important learning principle to be watching and doing rather than listening (p. 70). Additionally, Collinson (2005) stressed intentional, largely informal training with only two or a small group that avoided cognitive without affective learning (pp. 242, 250).

Biblical Foundations for Assimilation and Spiritual Growth

Busenitz (2005) stressed that every Christian believer holds a responsibility to pass the baton to another generation. By using a racing metaphor, Busenitz illustrated the relationship between pastoral ministry and the biblical mandate for making disciples (p. 92). House (2010) supported the concept of one generation mentoring the next and encouraged theological educators to replicate the biblical pattern found in both testaments. House emphasized the personal nature of such ministry as exemplified by Jesus Christ, who ministered face-to-face, and other biblical leaders who lived and ministered with others by eating, praying, worshipping, sharing, and suffering together. House also affirmed the early church's ability to multiply in numbers by repeating such a method (p. 4). The review of biblical scholarship focused upon passages found most prominently within literature directed toward matters related to assimilation and spiritual growth.

Foundation in Christ's Commission

Biblical texts that support Busenitz (2005) and House (2010) included Matthew 28:18-20 and 2 Timothy 2:2. Matthew 28:18-20 appeared often in the literature written by BMA authors with the tendency to use the passage as a motivator for global missionary endeavors rather than disciple making. MacArthur (1989) understood the

Great Commission as a command to true converts (p. 341). Hagner (1995) recognized

that Christ's commission in Matthew 28 concerned more than proclamation of the gospel

but included experiential nurturing in the area of disciple making (pp. 886-887). Talbert

(2010) understood the commission's fulfillment began with baptism and proceeded in

teaching others to obey Christ's commands (p. 313). Hagner (1995, p. 889), Keener

(2009, p. 3), MacArthur (1989, p. 345), and Talbert (2010, p. 313) all emphasized the

teaching element intended by Christ as the primary means for helping next generations to

observe the Lord's commands. Because of Christ's authority, earthly and heavenly, and

his promise to be with the disciples until the end of the world, it is appropriate to

understand the commission as relevant to all disciples of all ages (Boice, 2001, p. 646;

Hagner, 1995, p. 889; MacArthur, 1989, p. 346). The commission's reference to all

nations refers to ethnicities rather than geographical boundaries (Kim, 2005, p. 1;

McGavran & Arn, 1981, p. 112; Stetzer & Putman, 2006, p. 34).

Foundation in the Pauline Epistles

Regarding 2 Timothy 2:2, Kelly (1981) and Guthrie (1974) agreed that Paul

intended for Timothy to continue a process of committing what he had learned from Paul

to others who would be capable of continuing the same process. Kelly (1981) understood

the passage to establish a tradition through which believers secured the gospel through

faithful generativity (pp. 172-174). Liftin (1983) viewed the passage as God's method

for furthering the gospel through multiplication (p. 752). The process directed leaders to

entrust the gospel with reliable individuals (Hull, 1990, p. 179).

Ephesians 4:11-16 present a means for developing unity, maturity, and

Christlikeness through the ministry of gifted leaders. The passage indicates that the result

of effective leadership, preparing saints for the work of ministry, includes active participation in the growth of Christ's body (Hoehner, 1983, p. 635). Shenk and Stutzman (1988) interpreted the passage to mean that each new believer in a church awaits preparation needed to be released for ministry and that spiritual leadership under gifted pastors, as expressed in the passage "empowers all for ministry, both new and experienced believers" (p. 169). Moo (2008) noted that the term translated *everyone* appears in Colossians 1:28 four times. Each reference pertains to the development of everyone for maturity in Christ through a threefold leadership strategy of proclamation, admonishment, and teaching (pp. 159-160). Proclamation involves preaching (MacArthur, 1992; Moo, 2008; O'Brien, 1982). Admonishment involves the careful correction of those living in error. Scholars debate whether Paul directed the admonition toward believers or unbelievers (MacArthur, 1992; Moo, 2008; O'Brien, 1982; Vaughn, 1978). Paul intended the enhancement of everyone's faith through the ministry of teaching (Moo, 2008, p. 160) and expressed his personal struggle to implement the threefold strategy in the power of Christ (Vaughn, 1978, p. 193).

Foundation in Hebrews 5:11-6:3

Waggoner (2008) cited Hebrews 5:11-14 as biblical support for his position regarding the spiritual transformation of new converts. The biblical writer of Hebrews compared immature believers to infants needing to grow and develop beyond milk to solid food (p. 31). Hodges (1983) agreed that "it is unsatisfactory to remain a baby in spiritual matters" (p. 793). The writer of Hebrews 5:12-6:3 indicted readers for their sluggishness and warned them of potential apostasy and exhorted them to remain faithful (Thompson, 2008, p. 119). The passage validated the biblical intent for believers

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themselves to mature spiritually by learning to partake of God's Word (Cole, 2009, p. 82; Thompson, 2008, pp. 128-129).

Allen (2010) agreed that Hebrews 5:12 "introduces a contrast between what the readers are and what they should be. Because they have been Christians long enough, they should by now be able to teach others. But in fact, they need to be taught" (p. 335). The implication sustains the expected process of growth from a babe on milk to an adult on solid food (Allen, 2010, p. 337; Guthrie, 1983, p. 134; Johnson, 2006, p. 153; Thompson, 2008, p. 130). According to Johnson (2006), the passage teaches clearly that "maturity is marked by progress from student to teacher" (p. 155). Shenk and Stutzman (1988) agreed that as expressed in the passage, "maturity is measured by one's ability to live effectively as a Christian and teach others to do so" (p. 151). Although spiritual maturity requires the action of God, individuals own a certain measure of responsibility (Guthrie, 1983, p. 137).

Summary

The researcher's purpose for the review intended to synthesize literature related to church assimilation strategies and the actual experiences of new converts. The consensus among authors defined new converts as individuals having trusted in Christ alone for the gift of eternal life with the expectation of changed lives. Churches have an obligation to assimilate new converts. Such assimilation begins with baptism and church membership and concludes when converts reach stages of spiritual maturity demonstrated by their active service within a church and the ability to reproduce assimilation processes with others. Leadership is critical in the assimilation process and must include intentional efforts toward immediate assimilation, growth in spiritual disciplines and spiritual gifts,

and relational development within small groups and new member classes.

Much of the literature available on the subjects of retention and assimilation related to the Church Growth Movement prominent in the latter part of the 20th Century. For example, Lowe's (2011) and Rushing's (2007) dissertations used the same or similar literature in their reviews with a noticeable absence of more recent writings on the subject. More current literature, written since 2000, focused upon church multiplication and church planting (Hunter, 2009; Cole, 2005, 2009; Stetzer & Bird, 2010). Although such literature addressed concern for producing new converts, it focused mostly upon growing small group Bible study leaders capable of reproducing other small groups. Small groups have the potential to become churches. The literature related specifically to BMA authors addressed theological concerns such as baptism and church membership but did not include research related to new convert assimilation. Empirical data gathered by Rainer et al. (2010) revealed a significant lack of actual effort toward producing spiritual growth within the BMA. The gap in literature supports the relevance of the proposed phenomenological study to determine how adult new converts in BMA churches describe their experiences of assimilation.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Jesus Christ commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations

(Matthew 28:18-20). The process for disciple making included baptizing and teaching.

New Testament writers continued to express concern for the spiritual growth of all

believers, including their involvement in church (2 Timothy 2:2; Ephesians 4:11-16;

Colossians 1:28; Hebrews 5:11-14; 10:25). The practical need for a study of new

converts and assimilation became apparent from the literature that presented

disproportional numbers between official Baptist Missionary Association of America

(BMA) church membership statistics and the actual church attendance statistics. In other

words, more people hold membership in a church than actually attend. Data collected

from 47% of churches affiliated with the BMA in 2012 revealed that an average 17% of

the association's total membership regularly attended Sunday morning worship services

and an average of 14% regularly attended Sunday school (Directory, 2013, p. 92).

The review of literature revealed substantial evidence that pastors and other

ministerial leaders have interest in closing the proverbial back door of their churches

(McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 9-10; Nolan, 2004, p. 179; Osborne, 2008, p. 15; Rainer,

1993, p. 281). Quantitative research conducted in 2010, revealed that the BMA is losing

a generation due to its inability to attract persons less than 40 years of age, and that the

association lacks the magnetism needed to attract new members (Rainer et al., 2010, p.

5). Based upon the findings of Rainer et al. (2010), Crawley (2012) determined that

within the BMA an adequate "hands-on process whereby new converts develop disciplines that change their lives to be more like Christ is consistently lacking" (p. 57).

The current study's review of literature also revealed a lack of input from new converts regarding their assimilation experiences and recommendations from two doctoral dissertations that future research focus upon new convert input (Hux 2011; Rushing 2007). The purpose of the current study sought to answer the question: How do adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in Baptist Missionary Association churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? Subsequently, the research intended to discover what new converts anticipate, look forward to, or resist regarding assimilation and what information about how new converts describe their experiences of assimilation can help ministerial leaders become more effective in fulfilling their roles as leaders in regard to processes of assimilation. The following research question guided the study: How do adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in Baptist Missionary Association churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? Consequently, four sub questions exist:

1. How do new converts describe their conversions?

2. What do new converts anticipate, look forward to, or resist regarding assimilation, retention, and spiritual growth?

3. How did church assimilation strategies affect new converts?

4. What information about how new converts describe their experiences of assimilation can help ministerial leaders become more effective in fulfilling their roles as leaders in regard to processes of assimilation?

Research Design

Research problems or questions drive research methodology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.7). A phenomenological study was appropriate for the current study due to its emphasis upon the subjective experience of individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 24; Mertens, 2010, p. 235; Schram, 2006, p. 98). Mertens (2010) touted the intent of phenomenological research to focus upon understanding and description of an event from the participant's point-of-view. Such a methodology seeks to produce the individual's "perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience" (p. 235). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) agreed that phenomenological studies allow researchers to investigate "the meaning of the *lived experience* of people to identify the core essence of human experience as described by research participants" (p. 11).

Phenomenological study allows a researcher to focus on what an experience means for persons who have had the experience and are able to describe it comprehensively (Schram, 2006, p. 98). While pastors and ministerial leaders may think they are addressing the needs of new converts based upon their own studies or observations, receiving input from a new convert's point-of-view potentially provides data upon which to evaluate the effectiveness of leaders' strategies and assumptions toward new convert assimilation. Allowing members of a group to interpret their own environments serves as the key characteristic of phenomenological study (Mertens, 2010, p. 235). The current study created an opportunity for new converts to describe and interpret subjectively their own assimilation experiences and includes a single research question followed by sub questions, the norm for phenomenological studies (McMillan, 2008, p. 292).

Participants

The BMA formed in May 1950 and consists of 1,263 churches with the majority located in Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas (Directory, 2013, p. 93). Specifically, the BMA includes 333 churches in Arkansas, 30 churches in Louisiana, 178 churches in Mississippi, 77 churches in Missouri, 42 churches in Oklahoma, 392 churches in Texas, and 211churches throughout 21 additional states (Hudgens, 2012, p. 114). The BMA of America "is a group of regular Baptist churches formed in associational capacity . . . in theology the churches are evangelical, missionary, fundamental, and premillennial" (Hudgens, 2012, p. 6). When meeting in associational capacity, each church of the BMA receives equal respect and representation (Hudgens, 2012, pp. 6, 115). Furthermore, the association allows each church to maintain its individual right to participate or not participate in the work of the association while joining in cooperative efforts to spread the gospel of Christ worldwide (Lunceford, n. d., p. 58).

The association formed originally as the North American Baptist Association but changed its name to Baptist Missionary Association in 1969 (Duggar, 1988, pp. 69, 120). The BMA's purpose centers upon providing cooperating departments of missions, media ministry, church resources, and Christian education that assist local churches in fulfilling the Great Commission and inspire a missionary vision (Hudgens, 2012, p. 48). Statistical data reported by 31% of BMA churches in 2012, included 2,237 baptisms (Directory, 2013, p. 92). The current study explored a homogenous population by focusing exclusively upon churches affiliated with the BMA of America.

Selection of Participants

The current study involved both a purposive and convenience sampling of BMA churches that have baptized adult new converts, aged 18 or older, within approximately the previous one to three years. The sample's convenience referred to the researcher's intention to select participants geographically closest to him, thus, limiting the study to the Ark-La-Tex region of the southern United States. The researcher utilized statistical data recorded by the BMA and focused primarily upon churches reporting more than five baptisms in the most current statistical records. DiscipleGuide Church Resources annually gathers, records, and publishes such data.

Purposive Sampling

A purposive sampling selects participants because of their abilities to represent relevant constituencies and to ensure comprehensive coverage of the subject matter. Purposive samplings ensure some diversity within a study to explore the impact of the characteristic concerned (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 79). Limiting the research to BMA churches promoted homogeneity and ensured the desired representation of BMA constituents. Homogenous samplings allow the researcher to describe a particular subgroup in depth (Patton, 2002, p. 235). The current study used a sampling of BMA churches that had baptized adult new converts within approximately the past one to three years. In contrast to other samplings, strengths of both a convenience and purposive sample include less costs, less consumption of time, ease of administration, a high participation rate, and the possibility of generalization to similar subjects. Weaknesses of such samples include difficulty of generalization, less representation of an identified population, and results that depend upon unique characteristics of the sample (McMillan,

2008, p. 123).

Range of Sampling

The range of individuals and locations selected for a purposeful sample "should be fair to the larger population" (Seidman, 2006, p. 52). The average Sunday morning worship attendance in BMA churches totaled 75 attendees (Hudgens, 2012, p. 114). To ensure comprehensive coverage, the researcher's proposal divided BMA churches into three categories determined by average church worship attendance: small churches with less than 75; medium churches with 75-199; and large churches with more than 200. The current study sought to interview seven adult new converts, males or females older than 18 years of age, from at least two churches in each size category. Interviews from participants in the minimal number of six churches included at least 21 new converts and six leading staff members, someone identified by the church or senior pastor as a leader due to his or her position of leadership in the church, for a minimal total of 27 participants from six churches. Multisite phenomenological studies are not uncommon (McMillan, 2008, p. 292).

The researcher contacted the senior pastors of each church personally by making phone calls, informing them of the project, and asking them to serve as gatekeepers who would make initial contact with the new converts and arrange for the project interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 74). Data reported in the BMA's annual handbook of statistics assisted the researcher in identifying churches that met the location, number of baptisms, and average worship attendance criteria prescribed by the current research (Directory, 2013, pp. 46-77; Hudgens, 2012, pp. 68-99). For example, the researcher proposed to contact pastors of churches that reported five or more baptisms and located

within 30 miles of his home before he would contact similar churches located more than 30 miles from his home.

Sample Size

No mandate exists that ensures samples are of sufficient size to provide statistically significant variables for qualitative research (Pratt, 2009, p. 856). Usually, qualitative sample sizes are small (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 83). McMillan (2008) considered a typical sample size to include between 5 and 25 individuals (p. 292). Grubium and Holstein (2002) determined a normal range of 20 to 30 for qualitative studies (p. 99). Creswell (2013) identified multiple phenomenological studies that ranged from one to 325 participants (p. 157). Although no designated formula exists to determine qualitative sampling sizes, reasons exist that favor small sizes. For example, properly analyzed data will reach a point of saturation, obtaining little new information even with a larger sampling. Interviews in the current study reached saturation.

Three primary reasons for a small sample size favored the current study. First, the population was not diverse in nature but homogeneous. Second, the budget and resources available favored the sampling strategy (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 84). The current researcher possessed the resources and support needed to obtain NVivo software, conduct interviews with participants from churches located near his home or within driving distance, and to communicate with participants as needed for the research. Third, proper analysis of data creates an eventual point of diminishing returns, when more information contributes little to the research, which also favored small samples. The type of information gleaned through qualitative studies yields rich detail and can create an unmanageable amount of data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, pp. 83-84). Bloomberg and Volpe

(2008) favored an information-rich sampling and "generally recommended that researchers use their judgment regarding the numbers in the sample" (p. 191).

Setting

Patton (2002) encouraged researchers to "be as involved as possible in experiencing the setting as fully as is appropriate and manageable while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork" (p. 331). The researcher intended for interviews in the current study to occur at a location that maximized comfort for each participant (Seidman, 2006, p. 49). The researcher proposed interviews to take place over designated weekends at each participant's church building unless he or she requested meeting in a home or other location. In-depth interviewing becomes most effective and useful when developed within an intimate social context resembling a friendship (Johnson, 2002, p. 104). Minimal intrusiveness and time of presence help researchers to establish a trusting relationship with participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, 73). For the current study, interviews with females occurred in semi-private locations that allowed full contribution by the participants while protecting the moral integrity of both the researcher and participant. Semi-private implied the presence of another adult able to observe the interview visually but not audibly.

Data Collection

Interviews serve as the primary method of data collection for a phenomenological study (Johnson, 2002, p. 105; Merriam, 2009, p. 25; Mertler, 2014, p. 12). Phenomenological interviews utilize primarily open-ended questions that help researchers "build upon and explore their participants' responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under

study" (Seidman, 2006, pp. 15, 81). Collecting a wide variety of data through broad and open-ended questioning allows a researcher to gain "a more holistic picture of the phenomenon under investigation" (Mertler, 2014, p. 11). In general, qualitative interviews resemble a conversation and researchers benefit by using prepared protocol and interview guides (Johnson, 2002, p. 108; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 146-147). The researcher for the current study used prepared interview guides, based upon findings of the literature review, to conduct interviews with new converts, Appendix C, and leading staff, Appendix D. Seidman (2006) recommended the use of participant information forms both to facilitate communication and to aid researchers in selection of participants (p. 49). Appendix E displays the researcher's use of such information forms in the current study.

The researcher made audio-recordings of each interview. Recordings serve to protect researchers from possible accusations of mishandling interview material while giving a measure of assurance to participants that their words will receive responsible treatment. Preserved original source data can assist researchers in verifying the accuracy of interview transcripts (Seidman, 2006, p. 114). Note-taking provided an extra means for the researcher to ensure accuracy by supplementing the audio-recording of interviews. Benefits of note-taking included forcing the researcher to listen carefully, securing main points, and providing a backup in case of mechanical failures. Taking notes also allowed the researcher to write down additional questions for follow-up (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 111).

The researcher gathered data for corroboration by interviewing at least one leading staff member from each participating church to determine the church's intended

strategies for assimilation. The researcher compared information gleaned from leading

staff with data collected from new converts. Allowing participants to review notes taken

during an interview and verify their accuracy constitutes member checking and enhances

a study's reliability (McMillan, 2008, p. 297). After an interview, the researcher utilized

member checking to assist in establishing the validity of data (Mertens, 2010, p. 431;

Seidman, 2006, p. 98). Participants in the current research received a mailed or emailed

transcript of their specific interviews.

The current study's action plan included the following steps:

1. The researcher secured approval from the Dallas Baptist University

   Committee for the Protection of Human Participants.

2. The researcher contacted senior pastors of churches meeting the prescribed

   criteria within the research population of Ark-La-Tex BMA churches. The

   researcher used Appendix F and phoned pastors to inform them of the project

   and request their assistance as gatekeepers who would make initial contact

   with the new converts and arrange for the project interviews. The researcher

   mailed or emailed, depending upon the pastor's preference, an information

   form to be completed by prospective participants. The researcher retrieved

   completed forms from the pastor in approximately one week. Information for

   pastors included the presentation of Appendix A, needed to gain church site

   permission, Appendix B, informed consent of participants, and Appendix E,

   for participant information. The participant information form allowed the

   researcher both to communicate with participants and aid in selecting them as

   participants.

3. The researcher began participant interviews by presenting an informed consent statement and pledge to protect confidentiality.

4. The researcher used a prepared interview guide, Appendices C or D, to conduct interviews with each participant. The researcher anticipated approximately 45 minutes per interview.

5. The researcher created an audio recording of each interview and took hand-written notes.

6. The researcher transcribed interviews, email transcripts to participants, and invited participants to validate transcripts through member checking.

7. The researcher entered data into NVivo 10.

8. The researcher analyzed data and formulated themes based upon the research.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers serve as the research instruments in qualitative research and should address certain technical considerations of their studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 72). The researcher for the current study held membership in a Texas BMA church, served as an associational employee in the capacity of academic dean for the BMA's only theological seminary, received ordination from a BMA church in Arkansas, and served the BMA as president from 2008-2010. Such affiliation provided the researcher with access to the research population and encouraged churches to cooperate and participate in the research. The researcher avoided asking churches of which he had been a member or served as interim pastor to participate in the current study.

The researcher's educational background provided adequate qualifications and expertise for him to conduct the current study. The researcher earned a Bachelor of Arts

in Mass Communication degree from Southern Arkansas University. The degree included courses and work experiences in conducting formal interviews for both broadcast and print media. The researcher's graduate studies included an earned Master of Divinity degree from the Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Doctoral studies at Dallas Baptist University, including qualitative research that involved interviewing participants, supported the researcher's ability to conduct a phenomenological study. Studies in Christian history, spiritual formation, and ministry design exposed the researcher to historical approaches to assimilating new converts.

From 2010-2012, the researcher served the BMA as content manager for a disciple making curriculum entitled: *DiscipleWay: 7 Disciplines for Maturing in Christ* (Cooper, 2012). The researcher holds certifications from Evangelism Explosion (EE) International, www.evangelismexplosion.org, in Classic EE, Clinic Administration, Everyday Evangelism, Kids' EE, and Share Your Faith. The current study included EE's diagnostic questions in new convert interviews to determine what each convert identifies as the object of his or her faith. Although the participants included only those recently baptized, the current study sought to verify each profession without sharing a gospel presentation as part of the interview process. According to Merriam (2009), common practice among qualitative researchers supports an examination of personal biases and assumptions about the phenomenon prior to engaging in a study (p. 26). The researcher suspended his personal judgment and experience related to both evangelism and discipleship to help eliminate researcher bias. By bracketing his experiences from the current study, the researcher could focus attention upon the experience of participants

(Creswell, 2013, p.78; Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 104). Moustakas (1994) labeled such bracketing as epoche (p. 22). The researcher participated fully in the interview process and revealed to participants the project's general details. The researcher also kept information confidential and anonymous as appropriate for research with human participants.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological studies allow researchers to collect data from individuals and analyze them for the purpose of developing a composite description of what participants experienced and how they experienced it. Systematic analysis begins with narrowness of specific statements and advances to the breadth of themes discovered by the research (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Conventional analysis of data involves the organization of excerpts from transcripts into categories. Researchers then search logically "for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories and for connections between the various categories that might be called themes" (Seidman, 2006, p. 125). The researcher in the current study used NVivo 10 software for coding. The software allowed him to analyze data and formulate themes based upon the research without separating himself from the process of knowing the data (Mertens, 2010, p. 429). NVivo supports qualitative research analysis by assisting researchers in data management, ideas management, data query, graphic modeling, and data reporting (Bazeley, 2007, pp. 2-3).

Interviews serve as the primary method of data collection for a phenomenological study (Merriam, 2009, p. 25; Mertler, 2014, p. 11). The use of a single method of multiple sources, interviewing new converts and leading staff members, allowed the

researcher to validate the research structure by performing data triangulation. Pyrczak (2008) described data triangulation as the collection of multiple data from multiple sources by using a single method (pp. 143-144). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) agreed that data triangulation involves using different sources within the same study to validate results (p. 66). Although the term triangulation implies the use of three sources, the number of sources necessary to triangulate data calls for more than one without demanding the exact use of three sources (Mertler, 2014, p. 11). Triangulation allows the researcher to clarify findings by using different sources to confirm findings (Mertler, 2014, p. 11; Patton, 2002, p. 560; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 275). The current study created opportunities for corroboration of evidence collected from new converts (Creswell, 2013, 251; Mertens, 2010, 258). Trustworthiness was increased by allowing each participant to affirm or amend a transcript based upon his or her understanding of the interview. Member checking encouraged accuracy and genuine input from participants while supporting the researcher's efforts to maintain participant confidentiality and integrity of the research.

According to Patton (2002), when researchers allow review by inquiry participants, they "can learn a great deal about the accuracy, completeness, fairness, and perceived validity of their data analysis by having the people described in that analysis react to what is described and concluded" (p. 560). For Seidman (2006), "the governing principle in designing interviewing projects might well be to strive for a rational process that is both repeatable and documentable" (p. 22). The researcher anticipated the ability of future researchers to replicate the current research without his direct input, thus creating opportunity for increased validity through replication (Pyrczak, 2008, p. 145).

Early evaluation of interviews allowed the researcher to make midcourse adjustments if necessary (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002, p. 216). The researcher created an audit trail for the current research by documenting changes that may have occurred during the research (Mertens, 2010, p. 431).

Ethical Concerns

Ethical concerns for such a project center on the protection of human participants. The researcher had completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's basic course for student researchers on Human Participants Research Curriculum and planned the research accordingly. The researcher assumed that he would interview both adult males and females. Interviews with females occurred in semi-private locations that allowed full contribution by the participants while protecting the moral integrity of both the researcher and participant. Semi-private implies the presence of another adult able to observe the interview visually but not audibly. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) considered moral integrity differently and recognized it as the researcher's efforts to ensure the trustworthiness of both the research process and findings (p. 110). Strauss and Corbin (2008) preferred the term credibility for qualitative research to indicate findings that "are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers', and readers' experiences with a phenomenon but at the same time the explanation is only one of many possible 'plausible' interpretations possible from data" (p. 301). Likewise, the researcher reported the data, findings, and conclusions honestly and in compliance with expected writing standards.

The researcher complied with procedures established by Dallas Baptist University that required approval from the Committee for the Protection of Human Participants.

Each interview began by presenting and affirming informed consent from participants. The consent form included formal introduction of the researcher, name and affiliation with Dallas Baptist University, clarification of the purpose, research for a doctoral dissertation on the assimilation of adult new converts recently baptized in BMA churches, and explanation of the interview protocol, including confidentiality, recording, and right of the participant to stop the interview or refrain from answering specific questions. By confidentiality, the researcher meant to protect new converts and leading staff participants by keeping them unidentifiable (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 109).

Johnson (2002) drew attention to the importance of protecting both participants and their communities (p. 115). A consent form similar to that for new convert participants informed the senior pastor, who served as a gatekeeper, of the researcher's purpose, pledge for anonymity regarding the church, recognition of potential risks, explanation of interview protocol, and the intent to report the results regardless of their possible negativity. The researcher's plan adhered to Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2006) definition of informed consent by which "participants fully understand what the study is about, how the results will be used, that their participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time, and that their identity will be protected" (p. 110). The researcher proposed that if necessary, participants unwilling to sign the informed consent form could do so orally through audio recorded consent (Warren, 2002, p. 89).

Summary

The current study methodology utilized a phenomenological study to answer the question: How do adults baptized as new converts in BMA churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? The researcher proposed interviewing a

minimum of 21 adult new converts recently baptized by a BMA church located in the Ark-La-Tex region of the southern United States. By dividing the number of participants equally among relatively small, medium, and large church categories, with at least two churches in each category, the researcher ensured breadth of coverage among the participants. Additional interviews with a leading staff member from each church provided data for corroboration within the current study. Member checking also enhanced the current research's reliability by allowing each participant to review an emailed copy of his or her interview transcript to verify its accuracy. Using NVivo 10 software for coding allowed the researcher to analyze written transcripts of participant interviews by selecting excerpts, formulating categories, searching for connecting threads, and discovering common themes. Findings generated from the current research should confirm the realities of how ministerial leaders actually lead new converts toward assimilation and affirmed or disavowed the presumptions and practices of ministerial leadership strategies for assimilating new converts.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The purpose of the current study intended to answer the question: How do adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? Subsequently, the research sought to discover how new converts describe their conversions and what they anticipate, look forward to, or resist regarding assimilation and what information about how new converts describe their experiences of assimilation can help ministerial leaders become more effective in fulfilling their roles as leaders in regard to processes of assimilation. The following research question guided the study: How do adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in BMA churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? This chapter will provide an overview of the current study and information pertaining to implementation of the proposed methodology, including data analysis, demographic data, a list of research findings, and selected participants' quotations as supporting evidence.

Overview

The researcher used a convenience and purposive sampling of BMA churches located within the Ark-La-Tex region of the southern United States and utilized statistical data recorded in annual reports published by the BMA's church resources department to identify potential participating churches according to average worship attendance, location, and minimum of five baptisms during the previous one to three years (Directory, 2013, pp. 46-77; Hudgens, 2012, pp. 68-99). Initial contact with the

pastor of each church allowed the researcher to introduce the project by phone and determine the viability of each church to participate in the research. Eight out of ten churches contacted met the predetermined criteria, including the baptism of adults. Eight of the pastors agreed to participate and seven of the pastors provided the logistical support necessary to arrange for the prescribed number of interviews. Six pastors received the Church Site Permission Form, Appendix A, Participant Information Form, Appendix E, and the Pastor's Script for Initial Contact with Participants, Appendix F, by email immediately following the initial phone contact. One pastor requested postal delivery of the same forms.

Obtaining Church Site Permission

Following the obtainment of church site permission from the proper church authorities, the researcher began interviews by reviewing the Participant Informed Consent Form, Appendix B, with each participant. Both the participant and researcher signed the consent forms and kept copies for themselves. Twenty-three of the interviews took place in church facilities such as the pastor's office, a Sunday school room, a conference room, a cry room, or fellowship hall. At the request of the remaining participants, two interviews occurred in the participant's living room at home, two occurred at fast-food restaurants, and one occurred in the participant's office at work. The researcher conducted interviews with females in locations designed to maximize privacy of discussion while taking place visible to others. One participant invited and encouraged his pastor to remain in the room during the interview. Prepared interview guides, Appendix C and Appendix D, formulated in response to information gleaned from the project's literature review, aided the researcher in questioning participants.

Interviewing Participants and Coding Data

Interviewing took place over a period of approximately eight weeks during the

spring and early summer of 2014 with an average interview length of 48 minutes. The

interviews ranged from 20 to 82 minutes in length. Pastors from each church arranged

the timing and location for interviews. The nature of the project's convenience sampling

allowed the researcher to travel by automobile to each interview location. Mileage for the

research totaled 1,260 miles. The researcher used audio recordings and notes taken

during each interview to create verbatim transcripts. As a form of member checking, the

researcher mailed or emailed each participant a copy of his or her transcript to examine

for accuracy. Two participants returned the transcripts with minor points of clarification.

Incorporation of these changes into the data served to ensure the project's

trustworthiness.

To protect participants' confidentiality, language used in the fourth and fifth

chapters of the current study identify each new convert simply as Participant 1,

Participant 2, Participant 3, and so on. The chapters identify leading staff members as

Leader 1, Leader 2, and so on. The researcher holds electronic copies of participant

names and pseudonyms in password protected locations on his computer. A locked file

in the researcher's residence contains hard copies of all paperwork, including transcripts,

informed consent, and church permission forms. The locked file also secures electronic

copies of transcripts and the audio recordings of each interview.

Proper analysis of data in a phenomenological study begins with placing excerpts

of narrow and specific statements into categories and proceeds to the discovery of

broader or common themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 179). The researcher used NVivo 10

software for analysis of data and the formulation of themes based upon the research. Following transcription and verification by participants, the researcher uploaded transcripts into NVivo 10. A thorough reading of transcripts aided the researcher in grasping the breadth of information made available by participants. Interview guides used in the research extended from findings revealed during the project's review of literature and focused upon generating data directed toward answering the proposed research question and sub questions. Initial coding in NVivo 10 reflected anticipated responses to questions from the interview guide. Through the study's initial analysis of transcripts, the researcher simply placed notable excerpts into appropriate categories identified in NVivo as nodes. Additional analysis gave attention to the content available within individual nodes and led the researcher in the discovery of common themes. The researcher compiled repeated or closely related items found within categories into concise summary statements that adequately articulated each theme or finding.

Demographic Data

To enhance fairness to the larger population (Seidman, 2006, p. 52), the researcher divided BMA churches into three categories determined by average church worship attendance: small churches (SC) with less than 75; medium churches (MC) with 75-199; and large churches (LC) with more than 200. The researcher interviewed seven adult new converts from two churches in the small and large church size categories and seven adults from three churches in the medium church size category, for a total of 21 converts from seven churches. Additional interviews involved a leading staff member from each of the seven churches used in the study. Four tables display demographic data related to the number of participants according to church size, age and gender, date of

baptisms, and church memberships held prior to recent baptisms. One table, Table 2, displays data regarding the years of service by leading staff members in participating churches. Table 1 illustrates the total numbers included seven churches and 28 interviewees.

Table 1

Number of Participants by Church Size

	SC1	SC2	MC1	MC2	MC3	LC1	LC2
New Converts	4	3	2	4	1	3	4
Leading Staff	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Leading staff participants included five pastors and two associate pastors. Collectively, their lengths of service in the participating churches averaged seven years and ranged from one to 16 years. Four leading staff members worked for their churches in full-time ministry positions. Table 2 illustrates the years of service for each leading staff member.

Table 2

Years of Service by Leading Staff at Participating Church

	SC1	SC2	MC1	MC2	MC3	LC1	LC2
Years of Service	9	8	2	12	16	1	2

Table 3 illustrates the number of participants, new converts and leaders, by age and gender. New convert participants included 15 males and six females. The seven leading staff participants included males exclusively. Ethnically, Whites made up the entire group of participants. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 75.

Table 3

Number of Participants by Age and Gender

Age	Male	Female
17-24	2	1
25-34	4	2
35-44	4	0
45-54	5	0
55-64	5	2
65-74	1	1
75	1	0

The researcher interviewed adult new converts baptized approximately within the previous one to three years. Seventeen participants stated that their baptisms occurred within weeks or a few months of their conversion experiences. Four of the participants actually experienced conversions during their youth and later received baptism as adults. These participants either did not receive baptism at the time of conversion or decided as adults to receive baptism by immersion, a prerequisite for membership in BMA churches (Directory, 2013, p. 25). Table 4 demonstrates the number of participants by their dates of baptism.

Table 4

Number of Participants by Date of Baptism

Date of Baptism	Less than 1 year ago	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	3 years or more
Number of participants	6	7	5	3

The researcher questioned new convert participants regarding church membership prior to their recent baptisms. Six of the new convert participants had experienced no baptism or church membership prior to their recent baptisms. Fifteen of the new convert participants had received baptism and held membership in other churches prior to their

baptisms as adults in their current churches. Participants previously held membership in Assembly of God (AG), BMA, Baptist (BAPT), Catholic, Community, Methodist (METH), and Word-of-Faith (WOF) churches. Table 5 illustrates the number of participants holding membership in varied churches prior to their recent conversion and baptism experiences in their current churches.

Table 5

Church Membership of Participants Prior to Recent Baptism

Church	AG	BMA	BAPT	Catholic	Community	METH	WOF	None
Number of Participants	1	2	5	3	2	1	1	6

Findings

Research question one asked, "How do new converts describe their conversions?" In response, new converts' described their experiences and revealed the following findings:

1. New converts attended church at the invitation of church members with close relations to the participants.

2. New converts described the proximity of conversion to a major life event.

3. New converts described the influence of a leader upon the conversion experience.

4. New converts described having assurance of eternal life.

5. New converts were initially unable to articulate why God should let them into Heaven but adjusted their responses when asked an alternate question regarding the requirement for anyone to enter Heaven.

Research question two explored what new converts anticipated, looked forward

to, or resisted regarding assimilation, retention, and spiritual growth. In describing their experiences, new converts and leaders revealed the following:

6. New converts look forward to becoming part of a family-like fellowship.

7. New converts look forward to receiving Bible teaching as part of their assimilation and retention experiences.

8. New converts look forward to sharing their testimonies in hopes of helping others.

9. New converts hesitate to receive baptism and church membership due to particular fears.

10. New converts decide to stay in a church long-term when shown kindness and acceptance.

11. New converts consider positive speech and treatment of others as a sign of Christian maturity and spiritual growth.

12. New converts look forward to spiritual growth which results in increased Bible knowledge and service opportunities.

Research question three invited participants to describe how church assimilation strategies affected them. In response, new converts described their experiences as follows:

13. New converts learned what to do after conversion and baptism by observing others. In contrast, leaders depended upon classes to inform new converts of what to do after conversion and baptism.

14. New converts and leaders recognize the value of intentionality for assimilation but few can identify intentional processes used by their churches.

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15. New convert assimilation benefits from the efforts of churches and leaders.

Research question four asked, "What information about how new converts describe their experiences of assimilation can help ministerial leaders become more effective in fulfilling their roles as leaders in regard to processes of assimilation?" In describing their experiences new converts revealed the following:

16. New converts credit their leaders for effective assimilation of new converts.

17. New converts consider the availability of leaders to meet with them either in person or by electronic means as helpful to assimilation.

18. New converts consider leaders' expressions of sincerity and concern helpful to assimilation.

19. New converts tend to enter service when churches provide them with ample opportunities to serve.

Phenomenological study allows a researcher to focus on what an experience means for persons who have had the experience and are able to describe it comprehensively (Schram, 2006, p. 98). The current study created an opportunity for adult new converts to describe and interpret subjectively their own assimilation experiences. The following information describes the research findings and intentionally utilizes excerpts from participant interview transcripts to support the findings.

How New Converts Describe Their Conversions

Analysis of the data led to the discovery of five findings related to the conversion experiences of new converts.

New converts attended church at the invitation of church members with close relations to the participants. All but three new converts identified a person of some

close relation as making the initial contact and invitation to attend their church. Close

relations included friends, family members, neighbors, and acquaintances. For example,

Participant 22 credited the influence of neighbors who "for one thing . . . offered us to

come and visit church. And that's as simply as it went." Similarly, Participant 24 shared

that:

> A fellow in the back came over there and welcomed us to the neighborhood. And
>
> he offered to help in any form that I might need to get myself comfortable in my
>
> house. And then the man asked me if I was a church going person and I said, "Yes
>
> we are." And he said, "Would you be interested in a church?" I said, "What type
>
> of church is it?" He said, "It's a Baptist church." And I said, "Well, we're
>
> Catholic folks." And he said, uh, "Well, come to our church anyway, you might
>
> like it" . . . I kind of liked his attitude and his cheerfulness and his offering to help
>
> us out so he said, "It's not that far to go too" which is one of the advantages and
>
> so, we uh, attended church one Sunday morning. You know, they drove us to
>
> church and we came here . . . Yea, yea, yea, they drove us down, I'm quite sure
>
> that's what happened and introduced us to a bunch of members. All the folks that
>
> they introduced us to were just as friendly and sincere about, you know, a genuine
>
> warm welcome. And then when we experienced the pastor's sermon for the day.
>
> We kind of liked the way he delivered the message of the Bible. The thing we
>
> kind of liked the most about it was that he kind of related a lot of it to everyday
>
> life experiences. And, uh, well, wife and I went home and talked about it and I
>
> said, "Gee what a group of great nice people."

Participant 25 mentioned that during a period of personal distress his roommate told him

that the next door neighbor had experienced similar distressful issues. Reflecting back on

the experience with laughter, Participant 25 said that following a greeting and

introduction, "I laid down on the floor of his garage and started crying." The neighbor

looked down at him and said, "I understand" then asked, "Boy, do you want to go to

church with me?" Following an affirmative response, Participant 25 said, "I went that

first week and after that I ain't stopped."

While having maintenance work done on their new home, the maintenance man

invited Participants 19 and 20 by saying "Well, if you ever get a chance and want to

come to church, why don't you come over and try it?" Looking back, Participant 19

replied "Okay. We never had any intentions of joining a church." Participant 7 attended

church at the invitation of a girlfriend and confessed that they "met and came out here

and started going to church. I went to church before but it was for the wrong reasons, you

know. I'd show up on Wednesday night for free food or whatever." Participant 10 met a

young woman on Facebook who attended his current church. He testified that "I was

going to a different church and started coming to this one . . . I mean, nobody ever

looked at me like I was an odd person or anything. They just welcomed me as soon as I

walked in."

Family members invited participants to attend church. Participant 11's cousin

invited him to church. The participant recounted that "he's a really good cousin. He's

like, 'Hey, why don't you come with me to Wednesday night church?' I'm like, 'I don't

know man. I'll try it' . . . Well, I started coming and I actually enjoyed it." Admittedly

having fallen by the wayside, Participant 12 recognized the influence of his wife of more

than two decades who "just brought me out of the rut" when she started attending church

and "I just one Sunday morning got dressed and she said, 'Where are you going?' and I said, 'Well, I'm going to church with you if you'll let me.' I hadn't missed a Sunday since." A cousin-in-law reached out to Participant 14 during a crisis:

> That really meant a lot to me and, uh, over time I just kept kind of, something just kept tugging at my heart, uh, you know that "maybe I need to be at that church" and you know, one thing led to another and I kind of, my wife and I, you know, decided "Aw heck, let's go there one day and just see what it's all about" cause we kept getting people from the church who would call us, you know and just kind of loved us and uh, so we showed up at church one day.

Friends invited participants to attend church. Although not invited specifically to attend his church as an adult, Participant 23 decided to visit the church based upon the fact that the family of a friend he graduated from high school with more than ten years earlier attended the church. He had even "visited once or twice, you know, when I was younger." Participants 8 and 18 looked for churches without invitations but sought churches with specific age groups within the congregation. Participant 8 started attending church with her boyfriend's parents "and it was mostly just a bunch of older people and they didn't really do anything." On her own, Participant 8 began "looking around for a different church that was closer to my house and stuff and [the church] is right down the road from me, so, it kind of worked out." While attending another church prior to his baptism in the Baptist church, Participant 18 began to seek a new church because "there just really wasn't a youth program there . . . and we really were looking for a good youth program and really weren't necessarily totally satisfied and fulfilled with what we were getting at the [other] church."

New converts described the proximity of conversion to a major life event.

The proximity of a major life event to the conversion experiences of 13 new converts support this finding. Events such as making a relocation from the northern United States to the south, divorce, varied health crises, substance abuse, especially alcoholism, imprisonment, and the death of loved ones served to quicken participants' thoughts toward spiritual matters. According to Participant 19, health concerns following relocation motivated his spiritual thinking:

> We came down and bought this little place for a retirement place. My back, health was going down on me. I had cement dust in my lungs. Had to have my lungs washed out and stuff. I was slowly going downhill . . . [my] back kept getting worse and worse and worse . . . just a short time after that, I got to where I couldn't even walk or get out of bed. So, I went and had back surgery. I thought I'd be like a spring chicken, bounce right back, and I'd be doing what I was supposed to be doing. Well, two months later I went totally down again in my back. That's when I found out I had three collapsed discs besides the ruptured one. So, I wasn't getting a whole lot better and stuff. I had other health problems like kidney stones and stuff. So, where I wasn't getting any better, told my wife, "We've never been straight with the Lord or anything. I think we'd better do something in case something does happen to me."

New converts described relocating prior to conversion. Similarly, Participant 22 moved a great distance just prior to her conversion, "I was Catholic before . . . all the years growing up, yea, that was my main religion . . . and I thought to myself, 'I think it's time that maybe you should step aside and look at life in a different light.'" When

asked to share what actually stimulated her thinking specifically about conversion, she replied:

> Well, when I understood more of how they really teach from the Bible was intriguing to me. I love the Bible studies. I'm understanding more about the religion itself now than I ever did my whole life. And, it's a great way of understanding about God and all the teachings of, of his word from the Bible. It's, it's become more enlightening to me. I felt more than I ever had in my whole life. And, I think that's a good thing, so, that's why I decided that, yes, I would really like to join this church and become a member.

Following foreclosure on his house, sudden divorce from his wife, and death of his son, all within a matter of days, Participant 25 simply:

> Wanted the hurt to go away, the crying to stop, never cried three times in my whole life and [it] was almost a daily event . . . I wanted what everybody else had and I was always a friendly person you know, uh, a fixer . . . I can fix anything and that's what I tried to do with my family but I did it, you know, as you go along you do realize mistakes you made and things like that. And one of the biggest ones you just try to fix it without God and I said well "I'm not going to make that mistake again as far as fixing *me* goes, I'm going to let Him do it" . . . so far it's worked out fine.

New converts described the proximity of substance abuse to their conversions.

Drugs and alcohol abuse characterized the lives of several participants prior to their conversions. Participants 10, 15, 16, and 27 each acknowledged previous addictions to alcohol. One participant spent time in jail for driving under the influence of alcohol.

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While incarcerated, Participant 16 testified of his desire "to correct things in my life. God started revealing them to me as I was, you know, locked up and . . . I know I give my life to the Lord in jail." Prior to her baptism, Participant 3 revealed "Yea, I was doing really bad in my life. I was sort of going on drugs and all kinds of stuff." She received baptism "to cleanse myself I guess . . . Yea, kind of like a fresh start or something like that?" Likewise, Participant 10 stated:

> I was drinking, cursing all the time. I knew it was wrong and I guess one reason, before I started coming out there [to church], and before I started going to church at all I was going through a divorce and becoming an alcoholic. I wasn't taking care of my son, I had him through the court, but my mom and sister were raising [and taking] care of him. I'd go to work, go home, shower, and then I'd be in a bar. One morning I woke up and said, "I don't want to live this life." But, I guess you could say I was changing but I really didn't change change until after I got saved. I was like, "Well, I need to quit doing what I was doing." I was hanging around the wrong friends, I mean, I guess after you get saved you don't really have to get away from your friends but you need to get a new group, people from church that can lift you up when you're down and not ones that just continue, "Let's go to a bar or something, you'll feel better." I mean, you can't do that . . . One morning I woke up and decided I didn't want to do that anymore. I didn't want to put my kid through it anymore. I started going to church and met my wife. One night, [the preacher] was doing a series on a certain topic and I just kept thinking "he's talking to me." That's me and one night I, just in tears, I walked up and told him, because I'd said the prayer but I knew without a shadow of a doubt

if I'd driven home that night and had a wreck or something and die, I would not

be in heaven   . . . but, I for sure know today that if I were to die today, I know

where I'd go today.

New converts described the death of loved ones prior to their experiences of

conversion. For example, the death of loved ones served as impetus for Participant 5 and

Participant 14 to pursue conversion experiences. According to Participant 14:

> I can tell you right now without a doubt that I'd still be going through the
>
> motions in my life if my son, uh, never had gotten cancer unless some other kind
>
> of divine intervention had happened to me. But I keep pointing to that young
>
> man's sickness and him dying and I say, "Lord I hope that wasn't your meaning
>
> of it but I'm glad that I came, you know."

The death of his brother-in-law "kind of shook me," said Participant 10:

> It kind of shook me, knowing that, "Hey, he's 50 years old and I'm getting close
>
> to being 50." I think it made me go to thinking. To me, I lost my daddy and that
>
> didn't shake me. I lost my daddy and that kind of started the wheels turning. My
>
> daddy got saved before he died. That hit home . . . I wasn't really happy. I had a
>
> loving wife, a good family, but something was missing. Then, all of a sudden, you
>
> know, we was coming to church here and coming to church there. We weren't
>
> really sinking in and going to church and my wife asked me one night, she said,
>
> "Do you not want to go to [church]?" I said, "I don't know what I want to do." I
>
> was just lost, out there and didn't know. When my brother-in-law died, I don't
>
> know what happened that night. I wasn't that, I mean my wife was, but I wasn't
>
> that close to him. Yes, I loved him and all that but I love my daddy too but just

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something, and my wife said, the good Lord would have to strike me down cause I'm bullheaded. She'd never seen me emotional or anything like I was that night with [the pastor]. That's why I changed. That night I changed and I've never been the same person since.

New converts described the influence of a leader upon the conversion experience. Thirteen of the new converts specifically mentioned the influence of church leaders upon their conversions.

New converts described how leaders took the initiative in speaking with them about conversion. Although "going to church became extremely important to us in a very short time," Participant 20 expressed gratitude for the "nudge" given by the pastor because she "would have kept putting it off." Dealing with the guilt of his past required Participant 5's pastor to do "a lot of convincing, a lot of talking, and a lot of praying with me . . . he drilled me!" According to Participant 5, his pastor simply "wanted to make sure it was in my heart and he told me how hard it was going to be to change. But he also told me, 'pray for forgiveness and try not to do it again.'" The church's former pastor invited Participant 18 and his family "over for lunch" which, according to Participant 18, created an opportunity for them to discuss "my spiritual background and where I came from and my experience. I had mentioned the anointing the forehead with oil and he said, 'That's no baptism, that's not it.' That kind of stuck with me for a long time" and eventually led to his conversion. Appreciative of the time made available by his pastor, Participant 19 expressed the role his pastor played in helping him understand the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing him to conversion:

What really got my attention is when I asked to get saved . . . I was desperate and

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finally asked the Lord about being saved. I wanted to change . . . So, then I went

to [the pastor] and stuff, talked to him about what had happened. I didn't know

what was really going on. I told him the feeling I had. He said, "That was the

Holy Spirit." So, when I got straightened up enough, we joined the church.

A group of five or six individuals from the church requested a visit in the home of

Participant 24 who recalled:

Yea, they visited our home and talked to us and, and asked us if we were sincere

about you know joining the church and if we were, we should be baptized and that

means, you know, you trust in Jesus . . . Well, fact that you believe Jesus gave his

life, uh, to save us, you know, for any sins that we've committed, and at the time I

didn't feel I had any major sins, but I just felt that being baptized would be a

major part of me becoming a part of [the church], becoming a full member and I

wanted to become a part of a fine group of people, and, listen to [the pastor's]

sermon on Sunday. I found his sermon to be, uh, positive and you know just good

weekly lessons to listen to and get some guidance on how to lead a good Christian

life. . . . I figured that would be my key to get into Heaven.

New converts described taking the initiative in approaching leaders regarding

conversion. After a small group meeting with the church, Participant 7 called the group

leader and asked for help regarding salvation:

We bowed our heads and prayed on the phone right there. [The leader] shared

like, told me there was no wrong way to do it . . . and I asked him if he'd walk me

through it and he did. Trying to remember, can't remember what words he used,

but I remember bowing right there and it was something about forgiving me of

what I had done and, you know, everything led me to where I was at that point of life.

Participant 8 felt like "there was something missing . . . I wasn't really happy . . . I just didn't feel like I had everything that I needed." Such thoughts led to seeking answers to such questions as "What makes a person a good Christian and a good person?" She attributes discussions with her friend's sister as:

Kind of what led me to want to get saved but I wasn't exactly like sure how to do it or whatever and then me and [the pastor] had a nice talk about it and he's actually the one who saved me . . . I went up to him after service one Sunday and I told him that I was really interested in getting baptized. Me and him talked about it and he asked me if I knew if I actually wanted to get baptized or if I wanted to get saved? And we talked about it and then he saved me.

At the age of 12, Participant 11 made a profession of faith motivated by his desire to participate in the Lord's Supper, "It was just for the crackers and juice and all that." Listening to a sermon stimulated Participant 11's interest in a genuine conversion:

It really struck me hard on my heart because I knew that I wasn't really saved . . . I walked up to [the preacher] and I was bawling like a baby and told [him], "I got saved for the wrong reason at the age of 12 and I really want to be saved." So, he saved me and then that June we went to [the lake] and he said, "I want you to be baptized in the lake" and I said, "Sure thing."

The passing of a grandfather, the first person in her life to die, disturbed Participant 4 at the age of 12, "I was like, 'Oh gosh, we're all going to die and I don't want to go to hell!' I was young and I really didn't fully understand what was going on and I got baptized

then." While growing up, however, and after marriage Participant 4 said:

> I kept questioning and doubting and everything like that. I was like, "I'm so sick
> of this." It was just like a knot in your stomach . . . I'd had a lot of friends get like
> killed, at my age . . . you know, I can be taken in the blink of an eye . . . Finally
> called [the pastor], "I don't know if I'm saved or not; I'm just in such turmoil."
> He was like . . . "If you've got any doubt, you need to get this straight." I'm like,
> "I know I do, I'm so sick of it." So he was like, "Let's do it right now. Let's make
> sure" and so we prayed. I remember the prayer. He prayed and I said, "Am I still
> saved even if I don't remember every single word you just said?" He said, "Yes,
> you don't have to worry about that." I was like thinking, "I do remember and I do
> remember saying what I said. Not everything, but now I don't question it AT
> ALL! I have a peace." I remember growing up there was talk about [me], "Well, I
> just knew she didn't have that peace that passeth all understanding." You know,
> now I have that peace. I don't worry about it at all. I know and I know what I'm
> doing. I have faith, everything is different. I've grown up and I can understand it
> now. Before, I just didn't want to go to hell. I still don't want to go to hell
> [laughter] but it's different.

New converts described having assurance of eternal life. The researcher asked each participating new convert Evangelism Explosion's two diagnostic questions. The first question simply asks, "Have you come to a place in your spiritual life where you know for certain that if you died today you would go to heaven? Eighteen of the new converts affirmed they had come to such a place in their spiritual lives. Most said "yes" or "absolutely" to express such assurance. Participant 4 discussed the contrast between

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her ongoing struggle prior to conversion and her assurance of salvation since conversion:

It's just like you're fighting and the Devil is so powerful you know. But, I fear

God and every time I would like make a mistake or whatever, I would think,

"He's going to take me out of this world." It wasn't til I had my son that I fully

understood God's love . . . I always say that I don't want to die, cause some

people are like, "You're a Christian and you're afraid to die?" It's not that I'm

afraid to die, I'm prepared to die but I'm not ready to die, things like that.

Three participants professed remaining doubts about the certainty of eternal life. For

example, when asked if confident about the possession of about eternal life, Participant 7

concluded:

I'd like to think that but, you know, I struggle with like when . . . I start drinking

and I struggle with that from time to time. But when I'm working the 14 days, I

won't touch alcohol cause I've got something to do. When I get home, we live in

a sub division, mow the yard, I mean, I'd like to think I was but there's always

that doubt, "Did I do right?"

Similarly, Participant 23 responded to the question as follows:

No. I'll just have to be honest. I don't know, you know it's one of those, you, I

would hope so. I would hope that, you know, my asking God for forgiveness and

repenting but I think we all fight those demons that sometimes you can never

escape them and sometimes you can. But, you know, I'm not going to say I am

going to heaven [neither am I] going to say I'm going to hell when that day

comes.

Likewise, Participant 28 doubted the certainty of eternal life:

Sometimes I think I'm not really, 100% for sure cause I'm kind of like, living like two lives, one for God and one for myself and I'm trying to get myself to live just one life, one life for God. But, you know it's like with the workplace and all that it's just, seems it's just jerked me away from what I want to do for God.

New converts were initially unable to articulate why God should let them into Heaven, but adjusted their responses when asked an alternate question regarding the requirement for anyone to enter heaven. Evangelism Explosion's second diagnostic question asks, "Suppose God were to ask you 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?" The researcher asked the question of each participating new convert. Five of the new converts responded with faith-based answers focusing upon trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. For example, Participant 18 said, "I think this number one thing is admit that you're a sinner and ask for forgiveness and for Jesus to be your Lord and Savior." Participant 12 pointed to the fact that "he knows everything I've done. He's forgiven me for all the sins I have committed against him and everybody. To me, my belief and faith in his grace is the reason I'm going there." Similarly, Participant 27 declared, "Faith. Believing in Jesus, that's it. That's the only way. There's absolutely nothing that I could do or have ever done. It doesn't matter if I lived what we think is a perfect life, it's just, it's just not possible." Participant 22 concluded:

I would just tell him that I believe in him, I trusted him, and I want to just do everything I can to follow his way . . . and I know he died for our sins and I believe . . . that's all there is to it. He's in my heart and that's where I want him, there every day.

Participant 20 responded to the question by saying, "That's a hard one . . . because his

Son died to take, to pay for my sins even though it was 2,000 years ago. And, I'm not

sinless, you know. I don't think anybody is on this earth. I just want to go to heaven."

Later, Participant 20 added:

> You've got to believe in God and you've got to believe that Jesus died on the
>
> cross to pay your sin debt. You need to live . . . it says God-like, but my theory is
>
> that if I can treat other people the way I want to be treated, I'm doing pretty good.

Initially, the remainder of new convert participants provided works-based

answers to the diagnostic question asking why God should let them into heaven. Four

of these participants adjusted their answers to faith-based responses when asked the

follow-up question, "What is the requirement for anybody to get into heaven?" For

example, Participant 25 initially answered, "Well that's a good question…I don't know,

because He loves me, I pray every morning, I love Him…that's the answer." He adjusted

his answer by addressing the requirement for anyone to enter heaven as "Oh, accept Jesus

as the Christ . . . because, uh, He came . . . to give his Son, because He made us, and He

loved us, and He brought His Son down to take care of that business and He did." The

initial response of Participant 8 changed from a belief that she "would say that I know

that I'm not worthy of it but, but I tried to do what's right by His word and I think that

that is enough" to "as long as you love God and you put your faith in him, I think that's

all that matters."

Other participants responded to both the initial and follow-up questions with

works-based answers. Participant 7 responded initially, "I don't know, like I've tried to

honor your word and do right by you, but, I mean, if I went on trial for being a Christian,

I don't know, it would be hard." According to his follow-up response, the requirement for

anyone meant "to live life living through Jesus' eyes, everybody's going to sin, I understand that, but living life through Jesus' eyes and when you repent from something try to stay away from it." Participant 5 acknowledged the question as a hard one and answered, "I hope cause I'd done enough good for people and enough good for His word but I hope He ain't ready to take me because I haven't done enough good yet. . . . I just hope I'm worthy. I guess that's what I'd ask Him, I hope that I'm worthy." Participant 23 concluded:

> I'd have to say, "I don't know, humph, I don't know why you should?" . . . You know, I don't think there's *a* requirement. You know, it's what I've been learning it's, it's all on faith but then I'll read but you need to, you know, it seems like everything and every time I read something new, I feel like, well, we're going to get to heaven based on faith but then you also need to do good.

Participant 24 determined:

> I'd say I've led a good Christian life, followed the teachings of the Bible, and [been] honest with people. I tried to help the church out whenever there's needs that they need me to do. I help out and I do my best to set a great example at being a Christian so other people will take and see me as an example of a good Christian, you know. I feel it's important to be part of a church . . . Umm, having led a Christian life, Christian life or the teachings of the Bible, Ten Commandments. Live that kind of a life and you … follow the Ten Commandments pretty much that's it . . . I looked forward to most the fact that I stand a good chance of going to Heaven if I stay a respected member of the church.

The question startled Participant 28, "Oh my gosh, I, I honestly I don't know! . . . I don't know. I can't really think of any answer to that." He modified his response to say that the requirement for anybody to enter heaven depended upon committing unselfish acts to help other people:

> As for me, you know, spreading the word, you know, helping, helping not just them but helping yourself grow more and more into God. Don't think about yourselves. Think about other people and how you can help them to be saved and be ready for his returning . . . that's how I am, I feel, like if you'll actually preach to the people that'll help I guess you or yourselves get close to God . . . you want to do Jesus' will.

What New Converts Anticipate or Resist Regarding Assimilation, Retention, and Spiritual Growth

Seven findings resulted from the current study that addressed the anticipation and hesitation of new converts toward retention and spiritual growth. New converts anticipated family-like fellowship, increased Bible teaching, and sharing their testimonies. Hesitation came due to certain fears related mostly to water and crowds.

New converts look forward to becoming part of a family-like fellowship. When asked to explain what they most anticipated or looked forward to about becoming a member of the church, new converts consistently focused upon some familial aspect of the church. For the most part, leading staff participants agreed. For Participant 15, "just knowing that I was part of a Christian family is what I really looked forward to. Saying I was part of it." Participant 4 affirmed that "it's just the love that everybody has. Everybody just takes care of everybody. They're there and it's just like

you're all a family. I've got three families." Likewise, Participant 23 responded, "I think

having the church family. You know, like I said, growing up in a church and doing

things whether it be, you know, the church auction or, you know, just kind of having

that, that involvement in the church." The researcher asked Participant 23 a follow-up

question related to the value of having a church family. He replied:

> Well, what it can do is, it can be there when times are good and times are bad.
>
> You know, it gives you an assurance with your, with your faith and, you know,
>
> makes you feel like you're a part of something and hopefully for the better. You
>
> know, it makes you feel like you're, I guess, being a productive citizen, you
>
> know, being a productive Christian in society.

Similarly, Participant 2 anticipated being part of a "big family" and recognized its

benefits:

> If you need to talk to somebody, you can call them up. You're not alone when
>
> you're out here . . . It is encouraging. Sometime, you know, you feel like you
>
> want to give up, I say, no, you can't give up; got to call one of my church family
>
> members.

Likewise, Participant 7 looked forward to the encouragement and support provided by the

fellowship:

> I mean, the church, when I'm gone two weeks, it's hard when you're around
>
> people who GD this and GD that, you know it kind of puts you in a negative
>
> attitude. When I come back to church and am around people who are God-fearing
>
> people, it makes you feel full again . . . being full like you're bright, your attitude
>
> brightens, brightens your spirits about yourself, makes you feel good again like

there is a God that loves you, and there is someone out there, [you are] better for it.

Speaking about members of his church, Participant 19 said "some of them are just like brothers and sisters. . . . The others are good, decent, friendly people." Participant 5's usual resistance to intimacy with others lessened with the church:

> Just everybody out here, they just make you, you got to let them through. You've got to let them in. Lot of times I've pushed people away from me because I didn't want to be close to nobody. Now, I just let everybody in. And, you know, when you'll let them in, people care about people.

> ***New converts look forward to the acceptance provided by a church family.*** For

example, being with the people and accepted as part of the church family brought a sense of finality to Participant 5, "I thought that made it final. If they accepted me, I was truly part of the family and I could be with the church family. When they needed something, I could be part of that family." Participant 8 also looked forward to having "somewhere that I could go that I wouldn't have to worry about them judging me or anything like that, I know that as soon as I walk through those doors I'm loved." Participant 18 focused upon the visible expressions of love within the church:

> I guess being associated with all the people that I had met here and to be a member of the church with them. I was so impressed with every Sunday morning there's, it's hard to get people settled down in their seats. People are visiting and "How are you doing?" You can just see the love in this church, in each and every member of the church . . . I looked forward to it yes. I miss these people. I want to see them at least on a weekly basis.

Leaders agree that new converts look forward to participation in a significant fellowship. When asked what they thought new converts anticipated most about church membership, several leaders agreed with new converts' hopes for belonging to a significant fellowship. Leader 5 believed that new converts look forward to "the fellowship of this local body, I would say the zeal maybe for serving God. I think would probably be a good way to put it." Leader 3 responded, "I'd like to say it's our preaching and teaching [laughter] but I really think it's that fellowship, they really want to be a part of something." Leader 6 agreed:

Relationships . . . and accountability, and they want to be a part of something significant. And if ministry is, and service is important, and they're growing in their relationship with Christ, and they're journeying alongside brothers and sisters of the faith, there's just something contagious about that, making a difference.

Leader 2 also concluded:

I think from the time they get here, one of the things . . . certainly there's a sense of being loved and accepted. That's probably the biggest thing that people come [for] whether they're a new believer or just transferring in from somewhere else. There's a level of acceptance here, come as you are, it really is. Whatever background you've come from people are going to love on you, people are going to accept you. We're going to do our very best to meet you where you're at and then move from there. I think that's the biggest thing that a new member would find attractive but more . . . *comforting* for lack of a better word.

Additionally, two leaders and two new converts mentioned the excitement caused

by church activity and growth as likely reasons for anticipated assimilation and retention in the church. Leader 7 concluded, "I believe being identified with a church that's active, that we . . . are seeing salvation, and growth, and excitement." Participant 2 received encouragement by "seeing everybody, you know like happiness, they were just involved in a lot of things and I wanted to get involved too." Participant 3 most anticipated becoming a member "to help the church grow and just to help me and my family. Somehow this is how it's supposed to be." Leader 1 agreed:

> I think just excitement that we generate here. It's not entertainment. I'm talking about just the anticipation of growing, maturing, because like I say, in the last three years we've had more young adults come and get saved and baptized than we have even children. It's been young adults for the most part. I think they see what's happening with other young couples in the church and they're excited about that. There again, we're just close here at the church. I think they're excited about being a part of that.

New converts look forward to receiving Bible teaching as part of their assimilation and retention experiences. Fifteen new converts and three leading staff participants pointed to the interest of new converts in sound preaching and teaching of the Bible as important to assimilation and retention in the church.

Participants desire biblical preaching. In contrast to his pre- conversion naps during most sermons, Participant 16 said the "key word is I love it . . . the messages preached from the preacher are on time every time and it's not dull . . . I'm excited to hear what God's got to tell me that day." Preaching that comes "from the Bible" keeps Participant 18 attending his current church. In contrast to his former church, the doctrine

and sermons of which he called "all feel good," the sermons at his current church tell listeners that "if you're not saved and you're not living a Christian life, there's a fiery hell for you. Both sides of the story are presented here . . . and, it's all from the Bible. Everything here comes from the Bible." In addition to meeting new people and loving them, Participant 28 most looked forward to "drawing more into the word of God."

Leaders considered an emphasis upon the Bible as essential for promoting the assimilation and retention of new converts. For example, Leader 7 expressed that encouraging new converts to assimilate in the church occurred "through the preaching of the word, try to mature them, but at the same time also challenge them to be involved in the worship." The idea that the typical new convert looks forward to growth and interaction with the Bible seemed accurate to Leader 5, along with the benefit of such for spiritual growth:

> They're encouraged to be involved as well, I think, early on. I think that we do have pretty good Bible teachers. They can get plugged in to classes or Wednesday night Bible studies that they're encouraged to grow in their knowledge of the word. Which, I would say, God's spirit in the word is the key, he said, "sanctified by Thy truth" and apart from an intake from God's word, they're not really going to grow as a Christian.

Several new converts emphasized their church's focus upon the primacy of scripture as more important to their staying with the church than the relational components that attracted them in the first place. Regarding his assimilation and retention, Participant 27 said:

> The people and the friendships that I, that I've got, that I developed when I started

coming to church was obviously a big step but then that makes it easier but I

guess the main thing is through the Bible study and the word being preached . . .

The preaching of the word, that's, I like the fact that our pastor stands up and

preaches what's in the Bible . . . having that, a spiritual understanding, that helps

keep, being able to decipher and understand what is being preached . . . that goes

into play for me to stay in the church.

Similarly, Participant 15 placed preaching Christ over a great and friendly church

atmosphere:

If it wasn't straight-forward, no, I probably would not be here. If they weren't

preaching Christ . . . I don't think, if the preaching wasn't there, I don't think the

atmosphere would be there. I mean, everybody I think would want to go

somewhere where they preach the truth.

Participant 24 agreed than even an extremely friendly pastor who did not preach from the

Bible would pose a problem:

Because I'm here for a reminder of Christian rules and regulations . . . the Bible

message is important. You know these are the things we've got to be aware of that

we've got to comply with to be a good Christian, follow the Bible. And that's

what I like about [the pastor]. [He] takes the information from the Bible and he

channels it into our daily lives.

Other participants also appreciated the ability of pastors to relate scriptures to

their daily lives. For Participant 12, both the clarity and emphasis upon scripture

encouraged him to stay. Speaking of his pastor, Participant 12 said that "he's just a great

guy. When he preaches, he makes it so simple that anybody can understand it. If it's not

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in the Bible, he don't say it and that means a lot." Likewise, Participant 27 admitted a lack of knowledge regarding the Bible but appreciation for his pastor, "I like the fact that after he preaches I can go back to the Bible and study and pray. I can understand what he's talking about, where he's coming from. I can see it plain as day." Participant 15 agreed that "the preaching, it's on a simple level. It's not over your head. And it's about Christ. It's not sugar coated I guess you could say. I believe in straight forward. It's not trying to please the audience, I respect that." An emphasis upon scripture and its application also encouraged Participant 23 to remain in the church:

First is, is when you can, you're given these scriptures from the Bible, you know. When you say something that God says, that scripturally it's in the Bible, it's not just something that you think or you kind of paraphrase it. It's there. And then the other one is actually being able to take the story from the Bible and you can relate them to today. You can relate what you know, what we're going through in today's world and how maybe they were going through, uh, you know Paul and even uh, you know, Abraham, you know, you can build that relation.

Leader 2 hoped that making the study of God's word enjoyable would encourage new converts to assimilate and remain active in the church:

Wednesday night studies, I think are good. We do what's called Route 66 studies, going through 66 books, and it's going through the basics of God's word. It's not a verse-by-verse breakdown. It's more of the highlights and really finding Jesus in all of those. Those are helpful. We've got several of the new believers that come to that. It's really just getting them to have a passion for God's word. It's fun. God's word is fun. I guess that's . . . maybe it.

New converts look forward to sharing their testimonies in hopes of helping

others. Regarding spiritual growth, participants looked most forward to sharing their

personal stories in hopes of helping others. Seven new converts and one leader presented

the idea during their interviews with the researcher. Before his conversion, Participant 25

experienced divorce, death of a son, and house foreclosure within only a few days. The

dramatic life-change since his conversion had stoked his confidence and enthusiasm to

help others in the future. Participant 25 looks forward to the day that a new church

member, also coming through difficult circumstances, tells him, "Ah dude, you don't

want somebody like me." During the interview, Participant 25 shed tears and his voice

quivered with hope of responding, "You know what's happened to me? . . . I want you

more than ever dude. You belong here. Believe it or not, you belong here."

Similarly, Participant 5 indicated:

> I wish young people wouldn't go through what I did cause I lost a lot of good
>
> years . . . one day I would like to be able to give my testimony, to work out and be
>
> able to tell people what I went through and what has happened since I've been
>
> saved and everything.

Participant 27 hoped that "if my testimony can save one person from making the

decisions I've made or can keep them from making the decisions I've made then God

wins." Also, Participant 7 shared that he had "no problem telling people . . . my

testimony, what I've been through, what I've done. I don't want them to make the same

mistakes I did. Some of them mistakes I'm still paying for."

Two new converts had already shared their testimonies with their churches. For

example, Participant 14 shared:

God hasn't placed it on my heart to be a preacher, don't get me wrong, but . . . I

know from time to time [the pastor] will allow people to come up and talk . . .

maybe give a testimony and I've done that. I've given my testimony before the

church, which is about like the testimony I gave to you about my son a minute

ago with me crying and everything. So, you know, I don't know how much they

got out of it because, I was having a hard time with the tears.

During a phone call, Participant 16 shared with his pastor:

"The Lord is telling me to go the next step." He said, "What do you mean?" I

said, "Next step means to learn his word more and start ministering to people.

Start telling people [to] briefly highlight your past, get in it and get out, then tell

them what God is doing today." I'm not embarrassed to tell anybody. Used to I'd

walk into church with a Bible like this and walk out with it, never opened it.

Shoot, I want people to see me in the Bible. I've been getting up front and

speaking to people too. Never would have done that. Never would, you know, and

you know, because we're all accountable for each other . . . I have no doubt in my

mind I'm doing what Jesus wants me to do. I know that he's, I know now, like I

told you, that he wants me to minister more and talk more. I'm not bragging. I

don't want nobody bragging on me but [the pastor] said, "You're a good speaker.

You have a lot, you have a lot to offer somebody." You know, when you're in

recovery like I am, that's life. That's something that's planted in me for life now.

My goal is . . . I want to stop somebody so they don't have to go to the

penitentiary.

New converts hesitate to receive baptism and church membership due to particular fears. Fear of water, crowds, and misunderstandings about tithing stood out as the most prominent reasons for new convert hesitations about baptism and church membership. In contrast, leaders cited new convert fears of commitment as foremost.

New converts hesitate to receive baptism due to a fear of water. Three new converts and three leaders identified fear of the water as a reason they or others hesitated to receive baptism. Fearing the presence of water over her neck discouraged Participant 20 from baptism. She confessed "the only thing that I was hesitant about was being baptized because of the water. Not that I didn't want to be, just that I, like I said, I don't do under water." If not for the pastor's persistence, she said, "I would have kept putting it off." Leader 4 recalled a woman who expressed her fear by saying, "I'm deathly afraid of water. I don't even put 2 inches in the bathtub." In response, Leader 4 allowed her husband to stand behind the woman in the baptistry and shared with her, "I'll not force you, just use a handkerchief to cover your nose." Participant 22 also feared the water based upon her memory of previous close calls with water and testified:

> Now I was afraid cause I was almost drowned three times and I told [the pastor], I said, "Ooh, I don't know. I'm afraid of the water." [laughter] . . . like I said, I did have three close calls. That's the only thing that had me scared. He says, "I heard you don't want to get baptized. Why don't you want to get baptized?" I says, "Cause I'm just afraid of that whole thing, that I'm going to go back [in the water] and I'm not going to come back [up]." You know, I said, "Other than that I have no fear as far as the religion part of it." I think it's a good thing like I said, I thought it started a new lease on life. It was a cleansing.

From past experience baptizing new converts, Leader 7 recognized the concerns of adult

new converts, such as Participants 20 and 22, and observed:

> I think some are . . . a little reluctant about the process, you know, having never
>
> been baptized. And I've tried to help that by, you know, explaining, showing
>
> them the baptistery, and letting them know there's two or three different ways we
>
> can do it . . . and I've come to find that some people are afraid of water, especially
>
> some of our older people that have been saved and come for baptism . . . you
>
> know, the fact that they have to go under the water . . . I've baptized five or six
>
> this past year that were over 60. So, I, I had to deal with the fact that "We'll set
>
> you in a chair or on a stool and all you have to do is lean back and I'll support you
>
> and raise you up" . . . I had one that had a great fear of water but she wanted to so
>
> be baptized. She said, "How can we do it because I'm afraid to go under?" And I
>
> said, "Well, you've got to go under but you don't stay under very long." And, she
>
> asked if her son could be in the baptistery with her, "Sure, not a problem." And
>
> so, she agreed and, I mean, just getting her under enough for her to be immersed, I
>
> mean, she was as stiff as a board, so, I, you know, I got her up as quick as I could.
>
> But I think depending on the age, but those who aren't afraid of the baptism, it's
>
> that first time of saying, "Look, I'll do this *in* the church."

New converts hesitate joining a church because they do not understand tithing.

Three new converts either without previous church background or from a non Baptist

background expressed concern over what it meant to tithe. For example, previously non

churched Participant 19 wanted to avoid membership in a church where members

flaunted their wealth. He decided to approach the pastor with questions regarding tithing

and other matters related to displays of wealth and determined:

> If it was like . . . you had to wear suit and ties, about the tithes, and who drove the fanciest car, or who put the most money in the plate, etc. It wasn't for me. I'm old fashioned. I'd like to say I try to come from the old school . . . I didn't know how [the pastor] was going to react. Never been around it or in it, so, I might as well be blunt and straight out front with him before it went any further.

Initially Participant 22 responded that "I really can't say that I was really hesitant." Upon further thought, the participant recalled:

> Well, they did mention tithes, [it] wasn't mentioned in our old church, and I told [the pastor] that was a little uncomfortable, I says, "I'll try to do what I can but we did move a far distance. We went through a lot of expense sooner than what we wanted. If I can give it more at some time I will." You know, then, he understood that. I was a little concerned about that when I first did start but he eased my conscience with that. He said, "Fine, fine" and didn't go any further with it. That was, that was great . . . I don't know how it came about, then we talked about it or my friend said, "Just don't be concerned. That's just a blanket statement that they make," and, and then, she said, "Do what you can do" is what was said.

When asked to describe what the typical new convert resists about joining a church, Leader 2 responded:

> We certainly don't preach just money all the time or any of those things, but certainly we emphasize the importance of giving. That's one area of commitment that I think a lot of people struggle with, and certainly new members or new believers.

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Participant 25 viewed financial giving from a different perspective than other new converts:

> You know, the funny thing is it's like uh there's no money pressure or anything
> like that and . . . you just . . . want to give what you can, that type of thing, and
> you know, and you know in part, like I said again, in part of getting saved and
> stuff like that and baptized and talking, the church teaches you so much, you
> know, responsibility with your money and things like that and, uh, I kinda
> remember some of that preaching when I was younger. He preaches the same
> thing: put money in the plate. If you've got kids out there starving, the church will
> take care of itself.

New converts hesitate joining a church for fear of being in front of a crowd.
Five participants acknowledged a new convert's fear of being in front of a crowd of
people as a hesitation to their joining the church. Participant 7 identified no hesitations in
joining "other than I don't like to stand up in front of large crowds of people. I mean, I
know everybody here but I just don't like standing in front of a large crowed of people."
Similarly, Participant 18 expressed a "little bit of nervousness about baptism itself and
getting out front . . . other than that it was the right thing to do. Like I said, it just
convicted me that it was church business and to get it done." Participant 10 credited his
hesitation with joining the church to:

> Just being shy and bashful; I don't like getting up in front of groups really. I've
> wanted to be a member a long time but I just, walking down that aisle in front of
> all those people, it's not my deal. One day I just decided, "You know what, I've
> got to swallow this and do it." It's like every Sunday I was like, "I want to be a

member. I want to be a member." So, finally one morning or after service was over, I just walked down there and said, "I want to be a member" . . . It was time.

Although a church member already, Participant 5 reported a continual struggle with being in front of people. According to the participant, his pastor, Leader 1, "wants me to pray in front of everybody and I'm still struggling with that. He wants me to be more involved with church functions. I've got to work my way up to that." Leader 3 testified to the change made in a new convert's previous fear of being in front to eventual leadership in the church:

> I've got this one guy, you know, I love this guy. Their family came in, they were not saved, and he got saved. Then, he, he was scared to be baptized because he don't like to be in front of people. And the Lord just took that fear away from him and he was baptized. Then after that, uh, he's grown in Christ. He's on the building and grounds committee and here this past spring, he was named deacon. He's an ordained deacon in our church. It's just neat to see him grow the way he is.

New converts resist the commitment involved in joining a church. In contrast to the input of new converts, leaders pointed to the typical new convert's hesitation to make a commitment as reason for resisting church membership and baptism. When asked to identify what the typical new convert resists about joining a church, Leader 7 replied, "I think a lot of times it's making that move . . . to actually commit to something particular." Immediately, Leader 6 responded to the question:

> Commitment . . . and I think part of the resistance is, there's so much to church life and it can be very overwhelming, which is why we, we encourage the

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relationship with their [designated church friend] because they can help walk

alongside them in this journey and help them.

Leader 2 also responded quickly:

I would say . . . commitment really . . . I think that as you see across the board

that's probably the hardest thing to get from people whether its new believers or

existing believers is an acceptable, what I consider an acceptable level of

commitment, this being important enough to make a priority in your life. I think

that's one of the things we've begun to really desire for our people, to be

committed, new members and new believers alike to be committed. We certainly

don't preach just money all the time or any of those things . . . I mean

commitment to just your presence being here. That's one of the struggles we've

had most with the new believers we've come across is just the willingness or

maybe ability to give time to the church. So, I think that's probably one of the

things they resist the most is that level of time commitment more than anything

else.

Besides resisting his requirement for members to attend "all three services,"

something spoken with laughter, Leader 1 professed to make an intentional effort on his

part to lessen the pressures for new members:

You know, I don't know what they resist . . . I've not seen any resistance but of

course I don't require much at first. I'm not going to put the pressure on them to

do anything other than just encourage them to be here, encourage them to study,

encourage them to pray while they're at home.

Leader 1 also recognized the importance of a leader's modeling of commitment to the

church and adherence to a higher standard of accountability:

> I think the pastor of the church should be the example and live up to the standards
> the Bible says he should live up to. And I think we are held to a higher
> accountability I believe, a higher standard in God's eyes . . . They ought to see our
> faith in action and see us walking by faith and not by sight. If we do that as
> pastors, I think our churches will follow suit.

New converts decide to stay in a church long-term when shown kindness and acceptance. Twenty new converts affirmed that they felt assimilated and part of the church. The researcher attempted to define assimilation for new converts as matters involving the regular church attendance, spiritual growth, and increased involvement or service. The sole participant that did not feel assimilated pointed to her own lack of effort as the reason for non assimilation. According to Participant 4, "I don't feel like I involve myself. I feel like my church involves me . . . it's not for them lack of trying to get me to do stuff." Although Participant 7 felt assimilated, he also felt ashamed "for not being a bigger part of the church." He expressed:

> They do more for me than I do for them and that's kind of a sorry thing to do, you
> know. Feel like I'm taking advantage of the church, you know. That's not my
> nature. I'd love to do more for the church.

The length of time before each convert gained assurance of assimilation varied from "right away" to more than a year. Twelve new converts specified the timing of when they reached assimilation. Five leaders also provided estimates of how long they believed it takes for the typical new convert to assimilate. Table 6 presents the estimates made by both new converts and leaders.

Table 6

Estimated Length of Time for New Converts to Assimilate

	Less than 1 month	2-5 months	6 months	1 year	2 years	Unsure
New Converts	5	1	3	2	1	9
Leaders	0	2	1	1	1	2

When asked to identify a particular event or experience that served to confirm their assimilations, participating new converts most often referred to acts of kindness or friendship shown to them by church members. The welcome extended to Participant 11 by a childhood friend stimulated his thoughts that "he's actually making me feel at home because I hadn't seen [him] in a long time and he's making me feel like I've been here for maybe five years or something like that." Participant 12 said, regarding his church, that "it's just the way you're treated, you don't want to leave. I mean, it's just wonderful!" Feeling a "100%" part of the church, Participant 8 explained:

Like, every time that I show up, I can tell that they are actually excited to see me and if I'm not there for a while, they'll tell me, "Aw, we missed you last Sunday" and I'm like, "Oh, I'm sorry" and we talk about it. Cause it's like they actually notice if I'm there or not . . . Most people don't [want to be noticed] but I mean it's not so much like "Hey, look at me I'm at church." It's like they noticed that you didn't show up that one time. And they actually care enough to tell you "Oh, hey, we missed you last Sunday" or Wednesday night or something like that . . . That's really the only church I can actually see *myself* at because I've gotten so used to going there and the people there, like, they're all so nice. I know it's supposed to be like that at every church, but just because it's supposed to doesn't

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mean it will, and I really like the way that they do.

Similarly, Participant 10 appreciated the friendliness of his church as demonstrated by a lack of cliques, which he considered typical to many churches, and the privilege of sitting with anyone on any pew on any Sunday. He valued the idea that "you just go and sit with a different group of people. They're so friendly saying, 'How are you?' Again, it's just a friendly church home and I love it." Participant 3 appreciated the church's purchase of a new household appliance for her family prior to her becoming a member. The church provided Participant 4 with a surprise wedding. Reflecting upon the event, Participant 4 described how the bride and groom simply walked "in the door and the church is just filled with people. That is something so special. I'd only been going there a year and they're just such good people. Whenever something happens, they're there. That just shows they care." Participants 18, 19, 20, and 22 mentioned eating meals with members of the church in their homes and at the church facility as encouraging to their increased feelings of assimilation. Additionally, Participant 20 described the encouragement she experienced from church members a year after baptism:

> I really felt like no matter what, I was a part of it. And I don't mingle well. I'm kind of, I'm not shy like I used to be, but I'm not real outgoing. And they come over and have supper . . . I think that what was really the final touch was when I had my neck surgery. I guess the waiting room was completely full of people while I was having the surgery. I don't know, it just never, we had gone over for people having surgery, but it just never dawned on me that that many people really cared and would go out of their way for me.

Leaders also acknowledged the encouragement new converts received through the development of caring relationships as a motivator for long-term assimilation in a church. While Leader 5 hoped that "a hunger to learn more and possibly the fact that they are able to get involved in certain activities of the church, different groups for the women and the men, the youth, and children" motivated long-term assimilation, but he admitted that "it is the relationship with the people. They feel loved by the people." Believing that new converts felt accepted and able to serve, Leader 3 responded, "I think they build lasting friendships . . . and when they build these friendships . . .they come, they feel like they are accepted and then feel like they can serve if the Lord's putting that on their heart." Leader 2 also recognized the reality of relationships for retaining members long-term:

> Relationships. That really is the easy answer. That's the emphasis of my ministry is relationships and the need and power of them. I firmly believe that you can draw them with whatever, big things, big events or whatever, but it's relationships that makes people stick around. I think that what people find at this church is that there's going to be some authentic people that love them. We may not get it right as far as the process but one thing we're going to do best [is] to establish a lasting relationship with the people that come here. I think that my discovery, has certainly been with the new believers, is that's the thing they're hungriest for, someone who will care for them and help them grow. That was always my experience as I was walking through this walk, is the thing that I've desired most, is a strong relationship with people.

Although interested in relationships, Participant 27 recognized the tension between a new

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convert's relationship with people and his or her relationship with God:

> Obviously relationships are great, but I don't want to, I don't want to miss the
> point of my life, you know, for the relationships in the church, I mean, the main
> relationship in the church that concerns me is my relationship with Jesus, but
> that's the main thing.

Other leaders interviewed looked toward more organized efforts by the church to motivate long-term assimilation and address the tension presented by Participant 27. Leader 6 concluded:

> We instill in them the importance of embracing our mission statement, which is
> the core of what we do and that mission statement says that we want to bring
> people into a supreme friendship with Christ, his church, and to befriend the lost
> for the glory of God. And, when you are in that relationship with Christ and you
> are connected to the family of God, and you have a desire to want to befriend
> others who are lost in the community and bring them to that same relationship that
> you have with him, that takes a lifetime, because it's cyclical. As you fall in love
> more with Jesus and you are strengthened in his family, then you befriend more
> and then as you befriend more and they fall in love with Jesus and then they
> become part of the family then they seek and befriend the lost. And as you see the
> momentum of that growing, it's, it's a life, it's a lifelong process.

Using church mission projects, benevolence ministries, and recreational facilities support Leader 5's efforts to assimilate new converts for the long-term:

> It helps them to find something that they feel involved with. . . . Then, hopefully,
> it's the Holy Spirit, you know, working in their lives, seeing a change. I think that,

I'm looking at this from the church's perspective, but ultimately the new convert, salvation is of God and God's ultimately the one that is transforming this person. So, it's hopefully the leadership of the Holy Spirit that they see as they study God's word as a follower of Christ they serve in a local body. Hopefully, our church is one that they can find [as] that place to bring honor and Glory to God.

Taking a slow-paced approach to assimilating new converts revealed itself as another option for church leaders. For example, according to Leader 3:

We start it out pretty, pretty low level first. We don't let them teach or anything like that until they have proved themselves. You know, for example, I always, like kitchen duty or clean up duty or anything like that. If they're willing to serve, those are always open and usually our new converts will jump on that first because they feel like, "Well hey, I can do this." And they feel comfortable doing that and then we watch them as they grow in Christ if there's more . . . um, you know, elevated services that they could do.

Likewise, Leader 1 pledged to bring new converts into assimilation and involvement slowly:

I'm not going to let you sit back and just breathe God's air and call yourself a Christian. Not at this church. But I am going to approach you and talk to you about things and encourage you to roll your sleeves up and go to work. I'm not going to do that immediately but after a while, yes, you're going to be asked to do something. Maybe small at first and then grow from there. It's pretty much the preaching I think that they get it. I just don't want to put somebody in a position to where they're doing something because I asked them and they don't really

want to do it.

New converts consider positive speech and treatment of others as a sign of Christian maturity and spiritual growth. When asked to describe spiritually mature Christians, new converts most often referred to the positive treatment of others as a mark of genuine Christian maturity. Participant 20 believed that mature Christians "put other people first and the first person on their list is Jesus. They have a serenity about them." Reflecting upon her own spiritual growth since conversion, Participant 20 concluded:

I think of other people a lot more than I ever did before. I guess I was pretty selfish. I was very engrossed in my own family, what was going on with us instead of thinking about anybody else's problems and what might be going on in their lives.

Explaining the character of mature Christians, Participant 8 emphasized:

You kind of have to, like, you know, be a good person. You can't be like two-faced or anything like that. You have to show the world that you are a good person and that you don't do anything bad like steal or you know talk behind people's back or criticize others. Yea, a good Christian is somebody that loves somebody without knowing them.

In addition to caring for others and being a loving person, Participant 12 shared that "a Christian's not going to deceive you. He's not going to be mean to you." Participant 28 believed, "you don't need to be, like, tearing and building at the same time. You got to be building yourself up and helping other people build their lives up instead of tearing them down." Participant 24 agreed and described a mature believer as one:

Respecting the people around you…being honest with people, not being envious of other people, and that's one thing [I] like about being part of [this church] . . . I haven't met any "uppity" people that act as if they were better than I, because of whatever . . . somebody who you admire for their, uh, personal characteristics: honesty, positive attitude, you believe you're going to Heaven, and . . . people who have an attitude . . . that they're not better than you, people who want to be sincerely helpful if needed. Those are features of a good Christian…my wife and I help people in many occasions if necessary. You know some people are feeling bad, had some major setbacks in their life. We try to brighten their day by explaining that a person in past time who led a decent life are going to a better place: Heaven.

Six participating new converts recognized that spiritual growth required them to improve their speech, including their demeanor and words spoken to others. For example, Participant 20 said:

It just seemed like after the baptism we kept getting more involved and I kept getting . . . more conscious of things that I did that I shouldn't be doing. Like my potty mouth, for one example, my potty mouth . . . It's like every time I said something, I'd think, "Sorry Lord." And, I still catch myself doing that every once in a while.

Similarly, Participant 27 recognized:

I don't talk nearly as bad as I did either, I was pretty bad. I had a very filthy mouth. Which is, which is the common at a police department, so that's a definitely a big difference now, people see is, I ain't going to talk like this or that.

Participant 28 encouraged others to "be friendly and be you know, just yourself. Don't be rude or be mad at them for no reason. Like me, I'm a friendly person like I'm getting so much better at like communicating, not getting frustrated and all that." Participant 7 spoke of his time at work and cautioned others not to "let your temper and anger or whatever put you back in the position you was once in." Following the advice of his mentors at church, Participant 7 began reading a particular book of the Bible:

I went to reading through there and he really, the book of James really, explains it in ways that you can understand it. Like that verse talks about the tongue is like the rudder of a ship, so small but can do the most damage. And that's true. I've learned that quick in the married life. You can smart off something and should've just kept it to myself. [laughter]

One sermon particularly helped Participant 23 to recognize the need to control his reaction to his supervisors at work:

There was one where, you know, slaves obey masters, masters be kind to your slaves. It was kind of more work related, bosses and . . . it just happened that when I was at work something came up where, you know, I had to, it's like, we never had a problem with it but for some reason it was a problem. I just had to bite my tongue and say, "Yes, I'll get that done." You know, it, cause a lot of times people will, I'll snap back or will snap back, you know, if you're following Jesus' footsteps that's not the way to go about your business.

Participant 5 also noted changes in his speech in the workplace and admitted:

My tongue has gotten so much better . . . the guys that work for me, I've got about 20 employees, and they wonder a lot of times. I used to be a fire and brimstone

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boss. Now, I don't raise my voice. I get my point across and I learned that you

don't have to raise your voice to get your point across. Being saved, in my

opinion, being truly saved, has made me such a better person.

According to Participant 16, God began helping him deal with past dishonesties related to

his workplace and concluded:

So, God started showing me . . . I had people coming from [town] I'd done

wrong, lied to, done this and done that, and I done put my name out on the

highway five miles from [town] so I said, "You know what, I'm going to face

these people. When they come I'm going to fix them up, going to pray up, "Lord

tell me what to do." And here they come and they start coming in, not like herds

of cow, but they start coming in . . . neat how Jesus makes you talk the Jesus way.

Normally I'd get mad, blow up and curse them out or whatever and I didn't.

"Let's sit down and have a talk, see what's going on." Ever job that I done fixed,

you know, re-fixed and made it right. Doors kept opening, opportunities, you

know, good things.

New converts look forward to spiritual growth which results in increased

Bible knowledge and service opportunities.

New converts look forward to spiritual growth by learning the Bible, reaching out

to others in order to share what they learn about the Bible, and taking future teaching or

leadership roles in the church. Leaders look forward to seeing new converts to

maximizing their experiences of assimilation by developing in their abilities to make

disciples.

New converts look forward to spiritual growth by learning the Bible. In order to determine the perspective of new converts in relation to their churches' long-term aspirations for them, the researcher asked each participant to answer the question, "What do you think your church leaders want you to look like in ten years?" Nine of the participants responded with the hope of knowing their Bibles better. For example, Participant 15 noted the personal challenge that "scriptures don't lodge in my brain real well, so, I would love to figure a path out that would embed them in my brain better where I could share them more fluently." Although Participant 10 reads his Bible daily, he professed difficulty in retaining scriptures because "I've got a bad memory" but asserted:

> I'd like to know more about the Bible for myself and also so I can talk to other people. It's like somebody asked me one time, "What's so good about going to church?" I couldn't answer it at the time, but now, I mean, it [the Bible] says that "when two or more are together." It's just one of them deals. It's nice to know . . . when some people ask you that stuff, you can follow it up. It's not just your word against theirs. You can actually follow it up with scripture.

Likewise, Participant 5 expressed his desire to recall and use scripture in conversation with others. After referring to his mother's ability to read, cite, and quote scriptures from memory, Participant 5 asserted:

> I would love to be able to do that. I would LOVE to be able to just . . . Just like while ago, she was, something had come up at the house and I ran out there to see her just before I came down here. She quoted a scripture. I'd love to be able to do that. You know, that would be to me awesome to be able to talk to somebody, be

able to quote a scripture on something they asked you. To me that would be awesome and I'm going to get there one of these days. I'm going to figure out how to get there.

When asked about her spiritual growth, Participant 8 expressed the anticipation of growing more comfortable with her understanding of the Bible and the ability to share it with others:

I'm kind of hoping that like, you know, here in the near future or far future, whichever it may be, that I'll get more comfortable with and have more understanding of the word. That way I can actually share better than not understanding it and saying, "Oh, here, read this." I'd actually be able to like have people ask me questions and be able to answer them if they need.

The researcher asked the follow-up question, "How do you think the church is going to help you with that or are you going to figure it out on your own?" to which Participant 8 replied, "I'm sure for the most part I'll have to do it on my own."

Similarly, Participant 20 believed that her church leaders "want me to become much more at ease with reading the Bible and to work on retaining more of what I have learned." Participant 22 expressed an eagerness to "widen" her mind through daily Bible reading, ongoing participation in Bible classes, and continued learning, especially since "we didn't have a lot of experience with that over the years." Less certain than other new converts, Participant 3 suggested learning "I guess more about the Bible and what the Lord has, wants from me to do" along with becoming a better person who looks ahead rather than to her past as a measure of spiritual growth. Participant 4 confessed the need "to be a mature Christian, not still on the milk. You know what I mean? I find that

hard for me to do, because, basically I know I need to start reading my Bible more. I know that I do."

New converts look forward to spiritual growth by reaching out to others.

Nine participating new converts identified reaching out to new people as prospective church members as important to their spiritual growth. For Participant 23, "getting new members, you know, being able to invite people to church to spread the word . . . maybe being able to go on a ministry whether it be here in [town], or in the U.S. or overseas" corresponded well to his anticipated spiritual growth. In addition to increased Bible learning, Participant 20 also anticipated the need "to be more aggressive in getting new people involved in stuff" as a sign of spiritual growth. Since his conversion and church membership, Participant 24 recognized a new perspective and expressed the hope that since "now I'm on the other side where when new people come into our church I'd be aggressively, in a sincere, welcoming manner to new members of the church." Participant 18 believed that "one of the big things we're challenged to do is bring other people to Christ. It's our job to just go out there and not be afraid to draw people in; get more people saved."

Two of the new converts that agreed with the priority of spiritual growth by reaching out to others considered exemplary living as essential to outreach. Participant 11 foresaw himself as a future role model, similar to that of the associate pastor in his church, and capable of talking to people and being involved "with whatever I can with the church." Recalling how two church members reached out to him as a new convert, Participant 27 shared his hope of replicating their examples:

I want to be that same person for someone else, you know, set the example . . .

that's the main thing. They seeked me out. They saw that, they make me feel welcome. I didn't feel like a leper whenever I walked in. And, I was saved and I just, just didn't feel like a leper, didn't feel like an outcast, I didn't feel like, you know, no one didn't love me or anything. They showed me a lot of love. It was good. Still do, they're some of some of my best friends.

New converts look forward to spiritual growth by taking teaching or leadership roles in the future. Four leaders and seven participating new converts anticipated teaching or leadership roles related to the spiritual growth of new converts. For example, Participant 5 expressed the certainty that the pastor "wants me to be teaching a Sunday school class and being heavily involved. I know where he wants me and that's good if I can get there." Participant 23 anticipated "teaching Sunday school. Or maybe taking over a small group or ministry group whatever it might be. We have different ministries. We have parking, or I guess just taking over a leadership role in the church, whatever it might be." For nearly a year prior to the interview, Participant 14 had taught a Sunday school class in his church but also considered an increased ability "to come up front of the church at the last minute if need be and . . . be able to speak, you know, . . . share the word" appropriate for his spiritual growth. Anticipated leadership roles for other participants included service as a deacon or youth minister.

Participant 4 admitted a stagnated level of spiritual growth but verbalized her hope for improvement over the next ten years:

Basically, what I'm saying is that I don't need to be still having to have somebody constantly telling me like, if I have this problem, "Well, you need to go to this book. You need to do this." Like, to hold my hand. I need to grow up to where

those new converts, I need to be the one holding their hand and I need to have the tools and the verses and everything ready as a mature Christian to help those new ones. Because, if we had a world full of babies, you know, that would be really hard to have such strong faith. If we didn't have any Billy Graham or Adrian Rogers, or things like that, we'd all be like running around crazy like we don't know, you know, what to do next.

Four leaders affirmed their intentions for new converts to reach a goal similar to that of Participant 4, in which eventually mature converts serve the church by leading others toward maturity. For example, Leader 5 expressed the hope that his new member class would provide "an opportunity to see who's going to be more faithful and could do something more in depth." When such faithful new converts reveal themselves, Leader 5 envisions guiding them toward the idea that "their job as a Christian is to encourage others to discipleship." Referring to the lack of mature believers in his church, Leader 3 proposed taking a few individuals and helping "them to mature, up and going, try to get them where they can take others." Leader 2 agreed and recognized the need "certainly at some point, you talked about leadership, to find out . . . their giftedness and then be able to find a place for them to eventually make a disciple themselves." Likewise related to the future leadership role of assimilated new converts, Leader 6 asserted:

The pinnacle of assimilation for us is working through the process of being accepted and at that point, when they start to give back to the organization, we consider that an assimilated member. . . . And for us, that means they are plugged in to Sunday school, that they are participating in activities that they are serving in a ministry . . . We feel like, that the true result of your, of your existence is when

you give back. And, a true, when we look at being a disciple, a disciple maker, it's pouring back into other people and we want everyone to reach that point.

How Church Assimilation Strategies Affected New Converts

New converts described the effectiveness of church assimilation strategies, leaders, and the value of intentional processes.

New converts learned what to do after conversion and baptism by observing others; in contrast, leaders depended upon classes to inform new converts of what to do after conversion and baptism. Six of the participating leaders pointed tod the use of designated classes in the church as essential to their assimilation strategies for new converts; however, fourteen of the new converts specifically mentioned finding answers by observing others as the primary means of learning what to do next rather than attending designated classes. Leader 5's pastorate began approximately one year before the interview. Although trying to determine the church's former processes regarding the assimilation of adult new converts, he considered himself responsible "to encourage spiritual growth as soon as possible." He discussed a fourfold strategy for assimilating new converts that included his initial contact with the new convert followed by the new convert's participation in a new member class, connection to a small group, and in depth discipleship training. Leader 5 described the strategy of helping new converts know what to do next:

> As I mentioned, if I'm aware of a new convert, I'm going to do my best to reach out to them as their pastor, to let them know. Also, I'm real excited about my class. That's just a way that I think or hope is going to be a big benefit for them knowing what to do next . . . I feel personally, I think I've even read studies that

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the sooner you reach out to the new convert, the better chance you have of them becoming a faithful member. Other than that, they're going to, if they're hearing our services, they'll get plugged into a smaller group, a Sunday school class or Wednesday night. We have, depending on the age, different groups, Bible studies that they can get involved in. Hopefully there they're learning what to do next . . . Oh yeah, I want to incorporate it into any new convert whether it starts out as a one-on-one thing or, I use . . . a one-on-one or one on small group, one on three at the most, discipleship tool which is definitely more in depth. A way for not only new converts but anybody that's shown to be faithful and can benefit from learning the seven disciplines taught in [the discipleship tool].

According to Leader 5, the class he referenced included discussion relevant for new converts such as the experience of salvation, church ordinances, means for growth in the faith, basics of the Bible and prayer, "but also hopefully putting them on a road of discipleship."

Participants learn what to do after conversion by observing others. New convert participants from Leader 5's church received baptism and assimilation prior to his arrival as pastor and did not take part in the church's current assimilation strategies. Both Participants 19 and 20 credited their "watching others" as how they learned what to do next. Participant 19 learned over a period of time by "watching other people and what was taking place. I'm pretty heavy on observing. Another thing, I go to the older people because they've already been through it, don't mind talking to you, and they're going to tell it how it is." Regarding the need for baptism, Participant 18 attributed his understanding of what to do after conversion to his own observation of others:

I saw how strongly [the pastor] felt about it and I had so much respect for [the pastor] that it was just something I felt like was church business that I needed to take care of . . . I guess it was just inferences, you know, from [the pastor] and the positive experiences that my wife and daughter had told me about . . . It was really just an internal conviction of my heart and seeing it referenced so many times in the Bible. Just scripture was there. I was part of a Baptist church and I knew how [the pastor] felt about it and I was just convicted with it to the point that, you know, "This is business you need to get taken care of." It was something special to me to be baptized by [the pastor] . . . So, that was a lot of the pushing on my part, even though I'd been a member of the church for several years, it was like, you know, "You need to get this done."

At least monthly, Leader 7 seeks to inform new converts of what to do next by speaking at the close of his sermon about the importance of baptism. The church also offers a Wednesday night class for new converts once every two months, led by the pastor:

We have a short class that I teach that gives the general structure of our church, outlines our opportunities as far as, you know, classes, and I give them a short history of the church and I also acquaint them with the BMA cause our growth has not been from BMA churches . . . so I want them to know, you know, what BMA stands for and we talk about our missions, uh, really a type of indoctrination because otherwise, I think . . . we could put something in the church building and they read it but they don't know what that means. I've had people to join who had no idea what BMA, ABA, or SBC was, you know. You know they just got saved

and want to be a part of the church . . . if we don't have two or three join then I'll

. . . set down with [them] one-on-one cause I have the material, I have one page

on when the church began, the year that it began, you know just a quick little

synopsis of the history of it, and they're handed, of course we present them with a

Bible after their baptism, and after that Bible they're given our doctrinal

statement. And, then the indoctrinational class, I go over the doctrinal statement

to see if they have any questions. And then, all the stuff that we cover, they get

printed, given to them printed, in a notebook.

Participant 27, a member of Leader 7's church, attributed his understanding of what to do

next to the Holy Spirit "just tugging on me" and by the presence of "people that set good

examples in the church . . . you can tell they generally have a desire to serve the Lord and

that example is, that's a big deal, especially for new converts coming in."

When asked how and when a new believer knows what to do next after

conversion or baptism at his church, Leader 2 replied:

I don't think they do. That is . . . I think we're failing in that area and certainly

that comes back to me as a pastor. I understand that as I come along there have

been some of those things and we'll be intentional about letting them know.

What's available certainly is a new member class and letting them know what the

next steps are. I have certainly failed on that. I don't think right now there's a way

that we've established as a church to make sure the follow-up is there.

In spite of having a new member class, the statements of Participants 7 and 8,

members of Medium Church 1, agreed with the perceptions of Leader 2. Participant 7

credited a combination of hearing messages related to baptism and watching others for

helping him know what to do after his conversion. He readily professed his lack of knowledge as it pertained to requirements for baptism:

> Actually the guy that baptized me, he's a good friend of mine, I watched his son do it and he baptized people a couple of Sundays before that. I was completely clueless on, you know, I didn't know if you had to pay the church to get baptized, I didn't know nothing about it. I even asked that crazy question . . . I'm not really one to if you tell me "Hey, let's go do this," you know, I'm going to kind of look at the whole picture, the whole before I make my mind up . . . Just take it all in before I jump in to something.

New converts learn by asking questions. Similarly, when asked how she learned what to do after conversion, Participant 8 indicated that her own ongoing search determined what she learned to do next:

> I didn't really know . . . I kind of just like, I started asking people that I know are Christians, like my boyfriend's mom. I went up to her and was like, "Okay, I got baptized and I got saved. What am I supposed to do now?" And she was like "Well, you really don't have a thing that you have to do. You just kind of go with the flow." That still kind of confuses me . . . I don't really know what I'm supposed to do. I try to read my Bible every day. I try to go to church and I try to be a good person. Other than that, I mean?

Leader 3, an associate pastor, quickly referred to the new member class as a primary means for new converts to learn about the next steps of assimilation; however, the church did not require adults to attend the class:

> If they're an adult then they don't want to go through that class, either [the pastor]

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or myself will take them in and tell them, you know, what the Bible says about, "Okay, you're saved now. The Bible says you need to be scripturally baptized." Explain the process to them.

Informal meetings between leaders and new converts occur at the church soon after converts receive baptism. Leader 3 described the following:

We talk to them about the importance of, you know, being in attendance but not only being in attendance but if whatever the Lord has put on your heart as far as serving, try to find a place to plug in at. We try to do our best of making sure people get plugged in but I'm as guilty as anybody. Like in the youth group, I have kids that fall through the cracks and I can't get them plugged in and sometimes we lose them and I struggle with that because I'm bi-vocational and I can't commit, you know, what I'd like to that to see that grow.

Leader 3 shared his attempts to make immediate contact with new converts and direct them toward a Sunday school class. Contrasting his small church with larger ones, Leader 1 also acknowledged no established strategy for assimilating new converts:

You know, I think in a larger church they have classes, discipleship training classes and things like that. It's kind of more structured. In this church, there again, I'm going back to that same answer I gave earlier. I personally try to make contact with them weekly, to follow up with them. I call them. They call me. I make myself available and I encourage them and remind them that I'm available if you have any questions or need anything. It's more of a one-on-one kind of deal where, there again, I recommend books of the Bible to start with that I think are easier to read and understand and would help them as a new convert. Nothing set

in stone, but I just kind of take it by the person, depending on their age, what they're going through. I just trust that they have enough confidence and trust in me. That's the one thing I let them know is that I'm available. I'm not only your pastor but I'm your friend. You can talk to me; you can ask questions. So, how and when is just basically up to them individually, I guess. It almost makes me feel bad saying that because we don't have a program to really lead them and structure them and guide them in a step-by-step approach. Would that work? Probably. Would that help them? Probably. Is that the best answer? I'm not sure.

Members of Leader 1's church, Small Church 1, also acknowledged observing others as the most common means of learning how and what to do next for assimilation. Participant 3 claimed, "I just watched . . . It takes a while for me anyway. So, I didn't know what I was doing I guess. I didn't know how this church worked. I guess that's how." Participant 2 simply prayed. Participant 4 called the pastor and "before we got off the phone he was like, 'Now you need to get your Bible and start reading. Depend on that Bible so you can learn more about it and everything like that.' He told me right then." Participant 5 sought advice from his mother, the pastor, and others "that know the Bible better than I did."

New converts and leaders recognize the benefit of classes. The leader and each participating new convert from Large Church 2 mentioned the value of new member classes for the assimilation of new converts. Depending upon the new convert's age, Leader 6 shared that the church made classes available for children, youth, and adult new converts and noted that "for our adults, we get them plugged in to our [class] and that takes them through their experience, what they've done, what it means, and then just all

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the logistics of church membership, and Baptist doctrine." Upon further explanation, Leader 6 defined logistics and doctrine as "essential beliefs, doctrinal statements, missions statement, core values, our acronym for ministry, slogan, and then opportunities for them to serve in the various ministries of the church."

Participant 23 appreciated the letter he received from church staff and assumed they sent the letter in response to his having filled out a section of the church bulletin for visitors interested in the church. He remembered completing the section "and then probably within a week or two I'd gotten a phone call or I'd gotten some things in the mail." Participant 24 remembered hearing announcements at church about a new member class but said the pastor actually brought it to his attention "that there was a program offered that would help us understand what the Baptist church was all about . . . that was important to us to see what was expected of us and could we meet that criteria."

Participant 22 of Large Church 2 called the teacher of the new member class a "wonderful wonderful person" who would meet with her family either at the church or in their home. She continued:

> We invited them to our home and he came over there and he spent hours, and I
> mean, he was just wonderful. If I had a question about the Bible teaching or just
> anything we had to ask him, he just went right along, you know, stopped
> everything and explained it. And we took I think another month longer because it
> was so enjoyable. I never had that experience, going through, you know. That's
> why I love the church so much, that's the main reason right there.

Participant 25, also of Large Church 2, recognized what he called New People Groups, as a motivator in his joining the church. Sharing meals together made him feel welcomed

and allowed him to meet the church staff. He recalled:

You sit down and meet everybody and you talk to different people and they had people come in and sit with you that already belong to the church and they sit with you and they're like "Ok, we just wanted to tell you what [the church] is all about. Uh, if you've got a gift of any kind . . . you've got a family, you need this [or] you need that, let us know" . . . I wanted to join because I wanted to give, you know, cause they've really helped me so I wanted to join . . . so they said "Okay, this is what we believe in – we believe in God, you know, the Holy Trinity . . . you know this is our beliefs and if you want to join this church this is how we are gonna preach and how we're going to believe . . . and we do believe in the submersion baptism."

New converts and leaders recognize the value of intentionality for assimilation but few can identify intentional processes used by their churches. Fourteen participants, including new converts and leaders, believed their churches used an intentional process for assimilating new converts. Nine participants stated clearly that their churches did not use an intentional process and five participants indicated they did not know or simply did not provide definite answers to questions regarding such processes. Affirmative responses by new converts implied that church members and leaders tended to act with purpose; however, the new converts did not or could not articulate how such actions played specific roles in an overall intentional process of assimilation. For example, Participant 8 concluded:

I think they're doing it on purpose, not because they want to have people that, not because they're trying to make people come and just like, love God or anything

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but because they want to spread the love of God . . . I'm not saying, I'm not sure it's so much as a real plan or anything. It kind of just, I think they just, whenever people need help, they're there. They're not like going to force you into it or anything but like if you're interested in it or something, they're like there and they will help you 100%.

When asked if her church had an intentional process, Participant 22 replied, "I would truly believe so, yes! I think that they really do try to find some area, some way that . . . you could, you know be of a benefit to them. And I think it's important." Participant 12 answered, "Oh yes, yes, yes. We try everyway there is . . . invite them into anything, anything they want to do . . . I've tried to get them involved in Sunday school." Making attempts to welcome new comers demonstrated purposeful efforts, according to Participant 15, who stated that "every time a new person comes in they try to recognize them, and that's another thing, everybody, they know new faces and go up and introduce themselves. Right away they're showing love." For Participant 24, purposefully inviting individuals to participate in church ministries and greetings at church demonstrated intentional efforts for assimilation:

I think the ministries that have been offered to me like work project ministries, security ministry, greeter ministry… make me feel more like I was accepted into the church and want to be a member of the church. You feel wanted. Then you feel like this is the place for home . . . Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! Sunday morning we come to church people would say "Good morning, nice to see you again." What's that phrase, um? "You doing alright?" That's the Texas phrase.

New converts could not identify intentional assimilation processes. In contrast, Participant 7 said "no, not really" when asked if his church had an intentional process. He stated further that "they've got such a small church. We don't have enough new members getting saved and baptized to really, you know, have a need for that." Although Participant 24 described how sincerely the church seemed to welcome him, he "really never felt that they were that they had a plan of assimilating me. I didn't feel that there was a plan in motion. I feel it was a sincere welcoming and they liked me." Participant 4 described the typical assimilation strategy at her church:

> They give you a Bible, like the Gideon, well, we used to have a Gideon . . . he would always present the new convert with a Bible and the pastor and them do this certificate. They present the certificate but that's not like new convert class or something like that; nothing like that; nothing intentionally for the new convert.

The pastor of Participant 4's church, Leader 1, agreed that his church lacked an intentional process for assimilating new converts:

> Nothing really in writing that I have as far as an itinerary or maybe a guide for them; it's just pretty much one-on-one contact with them. And I encourage them to be here for Wednesday night services. I just feel like if you spend, if you make yourself available and develop that relationship with them. And then it's a personal thing I do, I want to stay in contact with them. I've seen that even before I was a pastor, people come, you know, make a profession of faith and get baptized. You look up a month later and you never see them again. I just feel like the church should be more responsible than that. Even to the point, and as we're talking, I'm thinking now as I'm talking, that I probably need to come up with

something in writing that I can go by, even to give them. I don't want to make

them feel like I'm watching every move or something. Anyway . . . I guess it

almost makes me feel bad saying that because we don't have a program to really

lead them and structure them and guide them in a step by step approach.

Likewise, Pastor 5 concluded that his church's assimilation process "has not been

intentional, but that's been one of my goals . . . to encourage it to be more of an

intentional thing." Ideas for Pastor 5's intentional strategy included an emphasis upon

creating disciples who continue making disciples outside the church property:

It can be a slow process starting out but it's a wonderful plan for church growth,

for spiritual growth . . . I'd love to see each of our church members trained in

DiscipleWay and able to take others through *DiscipleWay*, but realistically that

probably will never happen . . . but to add that philosophy in their mind to be

intentional in discipling other people just like you see Jesus did. In his ministry,

he had the 12 and also the three that daily, throughout the week, they spent time

together. That's what I would love to see [in] the future, of a more intentional

way, that discipleship's not just something that happens on Wednesday night or

something, but that it can happen any day of the week, anywhere, it doesn't just

have to be at the church facilities. I think that would be, the idea of being mature

in Christ, is understanding that's what Christ did in his ministry, and we'll follow

after him and he's our example, then we too need to be intentional and taking

every opportunity to see others grow. To see others saved.

Leader 2 recognized the lack of an intentional assimilation process in his church:

We have strong leaders, but what we're discovering is that there's not been like

this reproducible process for that. That's the struggle. Most of these people have come from a place or maybe they had somebody who really invested in them, wasn't intentional by any means. That's one of the hard parts we're really struggling with is finding an intentional way of helping that person become who God wants them to be.

Leaders identified intentional processes for assimilation. While promoting a "very intentional" process at his church, Leader 7 utilized a mixture of formal and informal strategies to assimilate new converts based upon their preferences:

We tried the formal. We had a mentoring program where I would take a younger couple and put them with a younger couple and we still do that on a, on a limited basis, but one of the things we've tried to do . . . on the non formal basis is [to] encourage those that have been here . . . to go. On a non formal thing, get acquainted with them, you know, make connections. So it's, because I've seen some times some pull away from the formal . . . some don't like that, some love that, so we've kind of got a mix of regimented and not . . . very intentional. We try to not just let them hang-out, you know, when they, after they're saved and baptized, you know, and are part of the church. We try to make the connection to keep them and get them more involved.

For Leader 6, "the intentional process is when the new member ministry interacts with them." Such interaction included providing new members with information packets that share about the church's vision, ministry, new member class, and diverse service opportunities. Church leaders have tweaked the process for 15 years. Leader 6 determined that the reason for an average of six months assimilation in the church "is

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because of the intentionality of our Sunday school classes. Some may term Sunday school as small group, or life group, or community group but for us, we still use the term Sunday school, Bible study." Also, each new convert from Leader 6's church, Large Church 2, mentioned elements of the new member ministry as helpful to his or her assimilation.

New convert assimilation benefits from the efforts of churches and leaders. New converts expressed the benefits church and leader efforts to assimilate them through preaching, the use of classes or small groups, and exemplary leadership.

New converts considered preaching effective for assimilating new converts. Despite the lack of intentionality in most churches, participants identified three primary avenues by which they did assimilate into the church: preaching, classes or small groups, and the example of leaders. When asked to describe how the church currently assisted new converts to assimilate now and grow spiritually for the future, seven participants identified preaching and teaching, primarily of the Bible. Leader 5 determined:

> I think it starts from the pulpit, from these new converts getting a steady diet of expository teaching and preaching. That would hopefully be at the top. Then, they're also going to see the same things in their smaller groups of Sunday school class and their Bible studies. So, I would say primarily the teaching and preaching of the word.

A member of Leader 5's church, Participant 18, agreed and appreciated "the focus on scripture and the emphasis on the Bible and the readings of the Bible when you're not at church . . . I've really liked [the pastor's] approach of, we're going through the New Testament, we're going book-by-book." According to Participant 18, the pastor also

assigned home study projects that allow individuals to gain a sense "of what's going on in that book and then see what's coming up for the sermon on Sunday."

For Leader 3, assimilation came "through teaching and preaching of the Word and then our smaller groups." Also, Leader 3 noted the measure of accountability created by his church's small groups and determined that "we hold each other accountable, so, it helps us grow spiritually. If there's a new convert, we bring them in and put them with people that's going to have their same types of likes and make them feel comfortable." Likewise, Leader 7 focused upon preaching and teaching and emphasized that "our main focus has got to be that the word is preached and the word is taught." Leader 7 also stressed the efforts of his church to avoid interference of entertainment or activities from "focusing on learning the word and living the word . . . showing that the word is alive and well and addresses the things of our life, and not all this fluff stuff." Participant 27 agreed and expressed his appreciation for Leader 7's "ability to preach the word and literally put it out there where I understand it . . . and it's easy to understand. I can go back, I can look and it's just, it's just right there." Participant 15 also appreciated understandable preaching and teaching:

> The classes, that's helped me a lot, Sunday school. Like I said, there again, the
> preaching, it's on a simple level. It's not over your head. And it's about Christ . . .
> It's not sugar coated I guess you could say. I believe in straight forward. It's not
> trying to please the audience . . . I respect that.

New converts considered the use of classes or small groups effective for assimilating new converts. When asked to describe how the church effectively assimilated new converts in the present and for future spiritual growth, fifteen

participants, eight new converts and all seven leaders, pointed to the use of classes or

small groups. Participants emphasized the opportunities made available by such classes

and groups for asking questions and interaction with others. According to Leader 1, "the

emphasis would be upon Sunday school, breaking that down to having those Sunday

school classes that cater to them pretty much." Leader 6 also recognized the value in

accommodating individuals who might be overwhelmed by the large worship service at

his church. When asked how church leaders help attendees deal with such intimidation,

Leader 6 replied:

> When people say that, one of the first things we say is, "Well, the worship service
>
> may be large but our Sunday school classes bring that family, shepherding
>
> opportunity that makes you feel very connected and at home . . . There's
>
> interaction with those that are in that specific class who have similar life skills,
>
> similar home, um, environments, children, or retirees, or singles.

Following the Wednesday night message at church, Participant 28 reported

regularly joining a group of men his age that allowed him and others to share "in a group

setting after the preaching and stuff. You know, we talk about that and how it affects us

and how it affects other people." In addition to Sunday school and the use of quality

material, Leader 2 credited much of his church's growth to the use of small groups

"because there's accountability in those groups that's not really anywhere else" and noted

that "everybody's got a part and they're accountable for doing their part of the ministry

and that's where we're really seeing the bigger part of our growth in those that get

engaged in one of those small groups." Leader 6 also noted that classes at his church are

"centered in the teaching of the word and it's in an environment where they can facilitate

discussion and interaction. There's accountability in that small group as well as, uh, a venue for encouragement."

Participant 20 pointed to the benefit of Bible classes in her church as helpful. She professed having "a real problem understanding the Bible. I mean, I could read it as well as anybody, but then I didn't understand what the passage meant." She shared that watching a teacher on videos explain the meaning of passages has "helped me." Speaking of her participation in a new member class, Participant 22 appreciated the willingness of the course teacher to answer her questions "about the Bible teaching or just anything we had to ask him, he just went right along, you know, stopped everything and explained it." Similarly, Participant 19 expressed his appreciation for Sunday school because "they actually stop and you can ask questions. [The teacher] does his best to explain it to you, then he picks up and goes on to the next, he doesn't get in a hurry. He wants you to understand." Referring to higher level classes offered at church, Participant 19 said that "it's like a hunger. I can't get enough of it. You might say I'm like a sponge. I learn something every time. A lot of people might not feel that way but I always learn something."

New converts considered exemplary leadership important for effective assimilation of new converts. Seven participants pointed to the example of church leaders as instrumental in the assimilation of new converts. Leader 1 and Leader 3 discussed the value of leaders who set an example. Although aware of the primacy of preaching and teaching the word, Leader 3 testified of his efforts to emphasize Christ's model for teaching his disciples with "on-the-job training . . . he prayed with his disciples. He taught them to pray. The saw him serve others and love others."   Leader 1

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recognized the high standards required of a pastor and concluded:

> I think the pastor of the church should be the example and live up to the standards
> the Bible says he should live up to. And I think we are held to a higher
> accountability, I believe, a higher standard in God's eyes. So, if our members see
> us doing something that's not right, then we just open the door for them to feel
> like it's okay . . . I mean it's just honesty and integrity, our convictions that we're
> to live by. They ought to see our faith in action and see us walking by faith and
> not by sight. If we do that as pastors, I think our churches will follow suit . . . it
> goes back to the old saying you hear, "do as I say and not as I do." I think it's just
> the opposite. Our members, their pastor ought to be the example. He ought to be
> the leader of that church and he ought to hold himself to that.

Participants acknowledged the influence of exemplary behavior of leaders in the church upon their assimilations into the church. Participant 27 repeatedly referred to "the examples obviously, I mean, I know I keep going back to that but we've got good people here." Services begin with the reading of thank you cards at Participant 18's church. The gratitude expressed by those who have received help from the church exemplifies "prayer support that's being given to one of the members of the church that's had a sick one or someone that's passed away." Such examples helped Participant 18 to assimilate. Without church leaders, Participant 11 stressed that "I wouldn't be the person I am today, the Christian I am today because they've shown the way that I'm supposed to go. Instead of ignoring them or blowing them off, I should take that path and become a better man."

Other participants noted church leaders particularly for setting the example they needed for assimilation. Participant 15's pastor explained to him "that being a deacon is

to help others and to witness, try to share your faith with others, it's about planting the seed." According to Participant 15, the associate pastor at his church regularly speaks "good to me and trying to give me examples of how to share with people. They've been good influences in my life, uh, let me know that it's not about you. Everybody's a sinner. We're all saved by grace." Participant 24 affirmed his pastor's example along with others in the church:

> He sets good examples before me and that's why I'm really happy to be part of [the church] because I see a genuine rich organization here, rich from the stand point of genuinely good people. That's what I mean by a rich church; a wonderful group of fine people. I truly mean that some of the nicest people I ever met in my entire life are members of this church and I wouldn't think for a moment having been here three years even considering another church because of the quality of the members of this church and the leadership with [the pastor]. He's a fine man.

How New Convert Assimilation Experiences Can Help the Effectiveness of Ministerial Leaders Regarding Processes of Assimilation

New converts described their assimilation experiences by noting the benefits provided by ministerial leaders regarding processes of assimilation. New converts credited the actions of leaders as helpful for assimilation, expressed appreciation for the availability and sincerity of leaders, and seized opportunities to serve when provided by their churches. Service opportunities most often resulted in serving meals or participating in maintenance projects for the church.

New converts credit their leaders for effective assimilation of new converts. Nineteen participating new converts believed that their leaders led effectively in

assimilating them as new converts and considered that leadership critical. As a result, new converts tended to encourage the continuation of current leadership assimilation practices. For Participant 18, the quality of deacon leadership at his church generated respect. He said, "I don't think they demand respect, it's just there. If someone came into this church and never been here before, they wouldn't know who the deacons were, except they might be the first persons to come up and greet them." In reference to leaders, Participant 20 determined that "they've been very critical. They started out by them including us in everything until we got to the point where, you know, if there's something going on we're going to go instead of waiting back for a personal invitation."

The hard work ethic of church leaders and their efforts to keep new converts informed encouraged Participant 22's esteem for leaders. Participant 11 considered leadership "very critical because I know all of our deacons, youth pastor, [pastor], some of the adults, they do whatever they can to help me grow spiritually and steer away from everything bad and become a leader in what I am." Using the Apostle Paul as a parallel, Participant 14 addressed the researcher's question regarding the critical nature of leadership:

> Oh! You know, if you look at Paul, how critical was Paul you know? I'm not comparing anybody in this church to Paul or Peter or anybody else, but it's, it's huge. I mean, if you have a good pastor in a church and you have a good, you know, assistant pastor . . . if you've got people like that in place, that care about you, and they don't just go through the motions, they genuinely care about you, that's huge.

> In contrast, the seven leaders stressed the importance of leadership but tempered

their remarks by recognizing areas that needed improvement. Noting a lack of retention in his church, Leader 2 testified that "what we're discovering is that with a lack of effective leadership, is that people aren't sticking. So, I think, to answer the question how important is leadership, it's critical, it is absolutely critical to the development of healthy Christians." Further, Leader 2 confessed his own ineffectiveness to delegate well. He currently rides the church van, plans the movie night, and works on the church website. While acknowledging that others could perform such tasks, Leader 2 expressed an ongoing struggle with not "letting go." He recognized that if "I can let go of and clear off my plate, the more healthy the church will be. For, like you said, there are more opportunities for people, but also, I'm not as stressed out and overwhelmed as I am now."

Leader 3 regretted how attendees to his church often come for a few weeks and then never return. Without leadership, Leader 3 believed that new converts would "fall by the wayside" and confessed that instead of addressing attrition by making phone calls, "I guess you get so busy with life and you don't make those calls or you don't make those inquiries." For Leader 6, new converts "would be lost" without church leadership:

Because so often what happens in the office environment, on staff, is whatever's the immediate need. So we're dealing with if there's an issue or a fire or an activity, whatever's the immediate need of the day and many times those people [new converts] can get filed, way back. And we want someone, a group of people, who that is there, intentionality, that's their focus is just on that group of people.

Leader 2 also pointed to the reality that churches tend to lack leadership:

The greatest resource and the greatest lack of resources are effective leaders.

Figuring out as a new pastor, figuring out how to raise up effective leaders has certainly been one of my shortcomings and something that I'm struggling with but something that I know is an absolute need. One of the things that I said when I got here was if God sent the church 200 new people, "What would we do with them?" Because the truth of the matter is that I can't disciple 200 new people and until we've got enough leaders that can take people on themselves, there's only so many people I feel like God will send us. Until we can effectively handle His people that He's going to send to us, I think we're going to be limited on that.

New converts consider the availability of leaders to meet with them either in person or by electronic means as helpful to assimilation. The availability of leaders to meet with new converts included personal visits, phone calls, texting, and being present during times of crises.

New converts noted the benefits for visits and phone calls in making leaders available for effective assimilation. Eleven of the new converts considered the availability of their leaders to meet with them in person or by electronic means as meaningful to assimilation. Conversations between leaders and new converts included casual chats over a meal, simple greetings before church, phone calls, and texts. For example, Participant 10 advised church leaders of the benefits in "just letting [new converts] know that you're here for them." Participant 2 appreciated the fact that "if you need to talk to somebody, you can call them up. You're not alone when you're out here." Likewise, Participant 5 spoke regarding his pastor that "really, I can call him tomorrow and tell him I need to talk to him and . . . I'll drive up there to his work and whatever I need he's there. He's been the one I really leaned on." Leader 1, Participant 5's pastor,

concurred that "the one thing I let them know is that I'm available. I'm not only your pastor but I'm your friend. You can talk to me; you can ask questions. So, how and when is just basically up to them individually."

Referring to various members of the pastoral staff, the leader of her new member class, and teacher of a class for women as helpful to her assimilation, Participant 22 said that "just any of these people, if you walk up to them or call them, and I've called them a number of times . . . and ask questions about the Bible and different things." Similarly, Participant 23 shared that a leading staff member "actually called me and just wanted to meet with me and I was, I think I was at that point in my life where I had lots of questions and I was searching for answers." According to Participant 23, he and the leader continued to meet approximately twice a month for lunch. He described their meetings:

> We just sit down and I kind of feel like I can open up to him and ask, you know, lots of questions, you know, not just mainly about scripture that I've read, come across, but also questions [about] things that have gone on in my life, scripturally where I can . . . get guidance, you know, in God's word.

Meeting with church leaders such as the pastor or small group leader allowed Participant 7 to receive answers for questions related to "big words" used in church. Commuting long distances to and from worksites also provided opportunities for Participant 7 to converse with his pastor and shared that "it really makes you feel good to have friends like here that you can tell them any problem you got." Reflecting upon the availability of church leaders, Participant 8 concluded:

> It's actually been very helpful because if it wasn't for like [the pastor] and stuff,

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he's so nice and he kind of just puts it out there. He knows it and tells you, if you need anything, no matter what it is, whether it be help coming to church or anything about, you know, that, he's there to help you. And that's kind of important whenever it comes to having your pastor or somebody like that. And the youth pastor, he's just like that as well.

New converts and leaders noted the benefits of texting in making leaders available for effective assimilation. Six new converts and two leaders mentioned the benefit of texting during the process of assimilation. Communicating with new converts comes easy to Leader 6, "I see people in the hallway, I call them, text them, email them . . . I'm a people person so I love to talk so that seems to come natural for me." The popularity of texting motivated Leader 7 to purchase an upgraded phone so he could text with church members. He observed:

I have, matter of fact, I've been a little surprised. I have some men that will call and I found where the women do more texting. They have a question, you know, um, and they'll [ask], "Okay if I ask, send you a text?" "Sure, not a problem" in fact I had to go get an iPhone couple of years ago because [laugh]. And that's the way many of them communicate.

Despite the small size of his church, Participant 7 enjoyed the contact made with church leaders such as the deacons or the pastor who not only make him feel wanted but "take time" out of the week "to come by and say 'Hey, how you doing?' or they'll text me . . . 'How are you doing? Is everything going alright? Can we say a prayer for you about this?'" When asked how church leaders might better assist in the assimilation of new coverts, Participant 23 suggested that leaders maximize direct communication by

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encouraging non staff to get involved in communicating with new converts. He stressed the meaningfulness of such communication:

So, when you get, you know, maybe you get a phone call or a letter, "How's it going? Is there anything we can do to help?"I think that would be good, just a phone call or a letter, making sure everything's okay. Or an email, I mean technology these days, or a text. That always is nice. You know receive a text, emails from people at [the church] . . . I felt a connection with a couple of people . . . they've kind of helped me on my walk.

Participant 8 appreciated the demonstration of pastoral care and opportunity to discuss issues about God through texting with her pastor:

He texts me every now and then and he's like, "Hey, how's it going" you know, checking up on you and that's really nice because it's showing that they care. And, you know, like we've had a few conversations about God through texts and it's nice to know that if I have any questions or anything that I can just text him or call him or anything like that.

New converts appreciated the presence of church leaders during times of crisis.

New converts especially appreciated the presence of church leaders during times of crisis. Five converts specifically expressed that the presence of leaders during such times benefited their assimilations into the church. For example, the death of a loved one also coincided with Participant 25's divorce. The pastor shared an analogy with Participant 25 related to being single after several decades of marriage and "put it in a way that made sense." Following the tragic death of a loved one, Participant 12 credited his pastor with helping him make it "through" the grief. Knowing that his pastor experienced a similar

tragedy years earlier helped Participant 12 feel a closer relation to his pastor. According to Participant 12, the pastor "got me through that and he's always been one to encourage you to do things, do things, do things. But, he called me every day." During a marital crisis, Participant 4 looked to the pastor's assistance because "when [we] went through our hard time he was there, and his wife too . . . He's really helped a lot as far as counseling and things like that. He gives of his time so much." Remembering the death of his adult son due to a terminal disease, Participant 14 pointed to the church sanctuary and shared, "I don't know how I would have gotten through that without this."

Leaders struggle to balance the amount of availability they provide for new converts. Although eager to assist new converts, leaders often attempt to balance their own busy lives with the possibility of appearing too aggressive or prying into the lives of new converts. For example, Leader 7 reported waiting for a week or two before initiating assimilation because "we don't want to be over zealous." Leader 1 agreed with the difficulty between "checking up" on people versus encouraging them. He described his approach to reaching new converts:

> I try to talk to them and see where they're at and if they have any issues and anything they want to talk about. Once again, I think it's about that putting pressure on them. If they feel like I'm making appointments, I don't want to run them off by doing that. So, basically, it is just making myself available, asking questions, and then just, you know, using that spirit of discernment as to whether I need to dig a little deeper or something like that. No, it's kind of informal. Everything's informal.

Although Leader 3 testified to one family's verbalized appreciation for the pastor's after

church phone call one Sunday, he also thought of "some others that are very private. I don't know if they would appreciate that or not."

New converts consider leaders' expressions of sincerity and concern helpful to assimilation. Ten new converts mentioned the sincerity and expressions of concern made by their church leaders as important to their experiences of assimilation. For example, Participant 16 recognized the critical nature of leadership in his assimilation as "big time! They care, they really care. They care." The leaders in his church demonstrated such care by observing and calling attention to his daily progress with encouraging statements, "Man, we're proud of you. We see what you're doing. Anything you need from us? . . . I feel wanted and needed you know. So, give me the encouragement to just move forward and do the next right thing." Participant 14 shared that "you feel the sincerity of our leaders here . . . I think the key word there is sincerity as far as, as far as the importance of the leaders." A sincere greeting from the pastor played a critical role in Participant 24's assimilation into his church and determined that if leaders had not shown such sincerity it would have influenced his assimilation:

> Yes, yes! That's true, yes that would have . . . if the pastor or my Sunday school teacher, chat with them and they didn't have time to listen to some little bit of small talk, they brush me off cause they were busy somewhere else. You know the fact that the pastor being the leader of the church treated me . . . with respect. I felt that you look upon me as what I am, as an acceptable Christian. I guess . . . what I'm saying is the pastor made me feel like I was meeting the criteria that he expected out of his parishioners by greeting me with a sincere, friendly "hello."

New converts appreciated personal greetings and attempts by leaders to relate with them or to find others with whom they could relate. Both Leader 7 and Participant 27 agreed that a common interest in a particular hobby caused him to relate with his pastor and created opportunities for them to discuss God and life together. Participant 27 also found two church leaders with military backgrounds similar to his which helped him "relate to them." According to Participant 27, the leaders understood his personality and "have a strong strong faith and service to the Lord and to the church and they just, they took me in, talked to me, related with me, built a friendship with me."

In an effort to help new converts assimilate, Leader 1 explained that, "normally, what I do is I try to put them with somebody they feel comfortable with." Participant 5 confirmed Leader 1's approach by pointing to a close friend from church with similar background to his. According to Participant 5 they "do a lot of talking. We do a lot of praying together. Because he's cut from sort of the same cloth I was and he's been a lot of good to talk to." For Participant 3, relating to people is "a big thing" and best accomplished by considering people's ages or experiences and "getting them involved in something. They always have to be involved. I figured that out." The participant followed up by warning leaders of the risks of not getting new converts to stay involved in something "as quick as they can."

Participant 18 remembered the importance of when his pastor "reached out for that of where my roots were and where I stood with the church." Such led to the participant's conversion and eventual assimilation into the church. Similarly, Participant 3 recommended that church leaders should initially get to know new converts "by talking to them and just see . . . where they came from." Likewise, Participant 19 recalled the

actions of church leaders who visited during his sickness and made him feel like he belonged to the church. He suggested that church leaders could help new converts assimilate by showing kindness and "that you care no matter the color of the skin, or whatever, or nationality . . . treat them like they'd want to be treated, as a real person." Similarly, Participant 14 encouraged leaders seeking to assimilate new converts to consider the following:

> I would tell them to, to show genuine love and concern for that person . . . be heartfelt . . . don't call them out until they're ready to be called out . . . Don't make them the center of attention, you know, in the church unless you feel like they want to be, you know. Like, just as an example, when new people come to our church, the only thing that we do here and the only thing that [the pastor] does, is he says, "I welcome any of you," you know, the new people to the church. He doesn't point at them and say, "Hey, what is your name?" or "Hey what's your name?" He's already done that generally before church. He's already met them and talked to them or shook their hand, you know. Some people don't like that. I don't like that. I wouldn't have liked that when I first came here, you know . . . just be, again I'm going back to the word sincere.

New converts do not understand the role of deacons. When asked to discuss the critical nature of leadership in the church, four new converts professed a lack of knowledge regarding the role of deacons in the church. For example, Participant 19 confessed that "I don't know what goes on between the pastor and the deacons or some of the stuff that they're trying to do. I'm in the dark on that. That could be because I haven't been there that long too. I'm new." Participant 18 expressed his personal

admiration and respect for deacons in the church but confessed "that's hard to say, because I don't know what goes on in the deacon's meetings and their relationship with [the pastor]" when asked, "If deacons were no longer here, what kind of difference would that make?" Likewise, Participant 3 asserted:

I personally, don't know like what our deacons do, besides carry the offering plates. That's just me, I love them, but I don't know what they do. I've heard that they're held to a higher accountability, you know, but I really think like in something like this, the people are going to like step up, you know, and if the job needs to be done they're going to do it regardless if you're a deacon or a regular member.

The church recently ordained Participants 14 and 15 to the office of deacon. Prior to the ordination, Participant 15 did not understand the responsibilities of being a deacon and confessed:

I've become a deacon in the church to try to help serve . . . I felt humbled, I didn't think I was worthy to be a deacon but they helped me to understand that it's serving God and anybody that's willing to give their life to Christ can be a servant. Don't necessarily have to hold a title to be a servant. I felt honored and the church accepted me as a deacon. I'm going to do my very best to serve any way I can.

Leader 1 recognized the priority of new converts to "have somebody they can go to. They've got to have somebody they can trust. They've got to have somebody that will be honest with them." He also recognized that if new converts lack such confidence in pastors, deacons, or other leaders in the church, then "they're not going to come to you

and chances are they're not going to come back." Participant 7 did present the role of deacon in his church and determined:

> You know all the deacons are good stand-up, well-rounded . . . there to help, obviously they've got their own family life they've got to live, but when they come to church good Christian men who are solid to their beliefs and core values and are not afraid to take the time to let you know "This is how we need to do this."

New converts tend to enter service when churches provide them with ample opportunities to serve. When asked to describe ways in which they served the church, new converts pointed to a variety of service opportunities but three areas distinguished themselves most. Ten new converts reported either ongoing or occasional service to the ministries of young people, including children. Participants 2, 3, and 23 worked together in the church nursery or primary-aged Sunday school. Participants 4 and 10 helped regularly lead or facilitate lessons for youth. Participants 11 and 28 occasionally speak to the youth group. Participant 18 aided in transporting the youth group on trips. Regarding food-related tasks, Participants 8, 27 and 28 served snacks to children and youth and Participants 19, 20, and 22 provided meals to needy or bereaved families. Involvement in maintenance included opportunities to serve from vacuuming the floor and moving tables to membership on formal committees related to planning and maintenance. Participants 14, 16, and 27 serve on committees. Participants 18, 23, and 24 helped to move tables or other furniture when needed.

Two leaders also discussed the availability of service opportunities for new converts but considered entry level opportunities at a deficit in their churches. Leaders 2

and 6 stressed their churches' efforts to help new converts find places to serve by exploring and discover their spiritual gifts. Further, Leader 2 testified of his church's struggle to provide service opportunities:

We've been working at trying to have different levels of service opportunities that way. Not everyone is supposed to be a teacher. Right now we don't have a whole lot of places that somebody can come and serve except in a teacher role. You know, obviously a new believer's not ready for a teaching position. So, we've really been trying to find some places of kind of entry level, soft entry level, places for a person to serve whether it's the welcome team, sound-booth team, some different places like that, even on [youth program] nights for them to come and work in the kitchen and serve the kids before they're actually back there working with the kids. Things like that, that way there's an opportunity to serve and when we ask for those levels of commitment, I think that's the biggest part is their willingness to be committed and to stay committed.

Similarly, Leader 6 recognized the need for more service opportunities and shared part of his church's most recent staff meeting in which they discussed the fact that "we need more opportunities for people to serve because in many ways we're capped out in our service areas. You can only have so many greeters, so many coffee makers . . . We need more opportunities for people to serve."

Summary

The fourth chapter presented 19 research findings. Arranged to coincide with the four research questions, the researcher presented excerpts from transcripts of participant interviews to support the legitimacy of each finding. Member checking of transcripts

conducted prior to the use of transcripts enhanced the current study's integrity and

trustworthiness. The chapter also provided detailed information regarding demographic

data and the researcher's implementation of the phenomenological research

methodology. Chapter 5 will discuss the current study's findings and make conclusions

based upon information gleaned during the current study. The chapter will also provide

recommendations for churches, pastors, and future researchers.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the assimilation experiences of adult new converts into churches affiliated with the Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) in order to help ministerial leaders understand what new converts anticipate, welcome, look forward to, or resist regarding their assimilations. The following research question guided the current study: How do adults baptized as new converts in BMA churches describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? The conclusions and recommendations found in this chapter attempt to summarize findings of the current study and answer the research question and its consequent sub questions related specifically to how new converts describe their conversion experiences, what they anticipated or resisted regarding assimilation, retention, and spiritual growth, the effectiveness of church assimilation strategies, and the potentiality of such information to benefit ministerial leaders' assimilation processes.

Chapter 5 will discuss the current study's findings and make conclusions based upon information obtained during the current study, including interaction with the literature reviewed in the second chapter. The chapter will include fourteen conclusions with additional sub points, as well as recommendations for churches, ministerial leaders, and future researchers.

Conclusions

The researcher made the following conclusions based upon the current study's findings and interaction with the review of literature.

Church Members Should Invite Others to Church and Provide a Warm Welcome

Although conversion actually came for most new converts after they attended church, the first finding revealed that they initially attended their churches when extended invitations by acquaintances, family members, friends, and neighbors. New converts interpreted these invitations as genuine, heartfelt, and nonthreatening. Along with the current study's tenth finding, the first finding also pointed to the critical nature of a warm welcome extended to participants when they first arrived at church. For example, Participant 24 appreciated both his neighbor's invitation and willingness to take him to church. When they arrived at church, the neighbor introduced Participant 24 and his wife to "a bunch of members. All the folks that they introduced us to were just as friendly and sincere . . . a genuine warm welcome." The finding coincided with Schaller's (1978) report that more than two-thirds of church members identified relationships, such as friendship or kinship, as the primary reason for their decision to join a congregation (p. 74). Similarly, Hemphill and James (2011) claimed that 79% to 86% of church members attended their churches because of a friend or relative (p. xvi). Eighty-six percent of new converts in the current study identified someone with close relations as instrumental in extending them an invitation to attend church.

New converts also appreciated the ongoing expressions of welcome they received after conversion and baptism. Participant 8 reported that "every time that I show up, I can tell that they are actually excited to see me." The experiences of new converts affirmed Osborne's (2008) belief that focused attention upon keeping people increases retention more than efforts at reaching people (p. 13). Findings in the current study reflect a financially inexpensive means by which churches can focus on keeping people

attending church: members that extend warm welcomes. According to the review of literature, friendship with others, personal relationships, and personal care are essential for assimilating new members (Bocock, 2011, p. ii; Hunter, 2009, p. 31; McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 75-86; Rainer, 1993, p. 282; Rushing, 2007, p. 120; Yount, 1996, p. 16). New believers need love and support to feel comfortable in church, and relationships developed in church serve as the key to successful nurture of new believers (Stutzman, 1990, p. 59).

Rainer and Rainer (2008) recognized the character of essential churches to encourage long-term church relationships by ensuring the connection of new members with others in the church (p. 147). Finding 18 further supported the need for ongoing welcome and expressions of concern during new convert assimilation, especially by church leaders. Ten new converts identified such expression from church leaders as essential to assimilation. For example, Participant 16 considered the nature of leadership "big time" to his assimilation because "they care, they really care. They care." Participants 14 and 24 appreciated the "sincerity" of leaders. For Participant 14, "the key word is sincerity as far as . . . the importance of leaders." Listening leaders who took time for small talk and demonstrated respect for new converts positively influenced Participant 24's assimilation.

Rainer (1993) emphasized the need for personal relationships over programs such as the sharing of meals in one's home (p. 282). Participants 18, 19, 20, and 22 mentioned eating meals with members of the church in their homes and at the church facility as encouraging to their increased feelings of assimilation. When church members provide an accepting and nonjudgmental atmosphere, participants seem more likely to return.

Participant 8 searched for "somewhere that I could go that I wouldn't have to worry about them judging me or anything like that, I know that as soon as I walk through those doors I'm loved." For Participant 5, "I thought that made it final. If they accepted me." Such statements agree with Klauck (1996) who recognized assimilation as "a process by which a congregation welcomes, receives, and incorporates diverse individuals into its unique family of believers" (pp. 118-119).

Leaders Should Prepare to Share the Gospel

The fact that new converts accepted invitations to attend church appeared positive. According to the third finding, new converts described the influence of a leader upon their conversion experiences. Such a finding should encourage leaders to prepare themselves for sharing the gospel with church new comers; however, the researcher observed the conspicuous absence of those who invited participants to church as part of the conversion experience. In other words, "What happened to the influence of church members after extending an invitation?" The finding implies that church members abstained from presentations of the gospel and relied upon leaders to share the good news.

Excerpts from nine of the thirteen participants described the influence of a leader upon their conversion experiences. Five of the nine participants initiated conversations with their leaders regarding the issue of conversion. Leaders initiated discussions about conversion with the remaining four participants. While appropriate for leaders to engage in evangelistic opportunities, Dunahoo (2005) promoted intentional communication, particularly as it related to spiritual gifts, that serving the Lord is "not merely a Sunday activity or reserved for church professionals. It is a daily process for all of God's people"

(p. 43). Cobb (2003) agreed and recognized the obligation of churches to evangelize and the importance of assisting each church member to cultivate Christian discipline in both the home and throughout the world. Cobb included personal witnessing among those important Christian disciplines (pp. 180-185).

Leaders and Church Members Should Maintain a Presence during Crises

The second finding revealed that a major life event often accompanied an individual's spiritual conversion. In fact, at least one participant from each church in the current study spoke of a major life event prior to conversion. Although these events included uncontrolled circumstances such as the death of a loved one or serious health problems, at least one participant from six of the seven churches mentioned personal struggles with alcoholism or drug abuse as part of his or her major crisis. For example, Participant 3 acknowledged, "I was sort of going on drugs and all kinds of stuff." Participant 10 confessed, "I was drinking . . . and becoming an alcoholic."

Finding 17 revealed that when leaders or church members made themselves available to answer questions, listen to concerns, and pray for participants during their crises and after their conversions, it encouraged their assimilations into church. Participant 12 credited his pastor with helping him make it "through" the grief of losing his adult son in death. Participant 14 pointed to the church sanctuary and shared, "I don't know how I would have gotten through that without this" after his son died. Interestingly, the review of literature lacked discussion of any kind related to the importance of a leader or church member's presence during times of crisis prior to someone's conversion. Another concern raised by the current study begs the question, "Are churches prepared to help new converts dealing with addictions to drugs or

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alcohol?" Admittedly, the review of literature focused upon assimilation more prominently than it did upon evangelism. Perhaps a review of literature on evangelism would provide information related directly to the spiritual conversion of those struggling with addictions.

Churches Should Give Attention to Doctrinal Training

The fourth finding revealed that new converts felt an assurance of eternal life. The researcher asked new converts both of Evangelism Explosion's diagnostic questions. The first question seeks to discover if an individual believes he or she possesses assurance of eternal life. Predominately, participants in the current study expressed such assurance. The fifth finding resulted from participant responses to a second diagnostic question. The question seeks to diagnose what a person actually trusts in for eternal life. According to the BMA doctrinal statement, the basis for conversion "is wholly on the grace of God apart from works . . . Anyone who will exercise repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved" (Hudgens, 2012, p. 46). Similarly, Kennedy (1996), the founder of Evangelism Explosion, promoted the idea that conversion results when an individual receives the gift of eternal life by faith in Christ alone (p. 98). Gaylor and Blaylock (1974) defined justification as a state in which one receives a declaration of righteousness before God that is "obtained by faith apart from any admixture of works" (p. 8).

Despite the BMA's doctrinal position that conversion results by faith in Christ alone, the current study's fifth finding revealed the struggle of new converts to articulate why God should let them into heaven. The researcher anticipated that participant responses would correspond with the BMA doctrinal statement, based on each

participant's membership in a BMA church; however, initially, only five of the 21 new

converts indicated God should let them into heaven because of faith in Christ alone. For

example, Participant 18 said, "I think this number one thing is admit that you're a sinner

and ask for forgiveness and for Jesus to be your Lord and Savior." Similarly, Participant

27 declared, "Faith. Believing in Jesus, that's it. That's the only way. There's absolutely

nothing that I could do or have ever done." Such answers reflect the view of the BMA

and the broader evangelical community as evidenced by the literature (Dever, 2012, p.

66; Issler, 2012, p. 53; Moyer, 1994, p. 339; Rainer, 2013, p. 70; Waggoner, 2008, p.

29).

In contrast, other participants provided works-based answers. For example,

Participant 5 hoped that God would let him into heaven because "I'd done enough good

for people and enough good for His word." Participant 24 determined that the reasons for

his entry into heaven included having led a good Christian life, followed biblical

teachings, honesty, helping meet the needs of others, setting a good example, following

the Ten Commandments, and "the fact that I stand a good chance of going to Heaven if I

stay a respected member of the church." Four participants adjusted their answers to

faith-based responses when asked the follow-up question, "What is the requirement for

anybody to get into heaven?" For example, Participant 25 initially answered from, "I

don't know, because He loves me, I pray every morning, I love Him…that's the answer"

then adjusted his answer by addressing the requirement for anyone to enter heaven as

"Oh, accept Jesus as the Christ."

Does the struggle of new converts to articulate the doctrinal teaching that

salvation comes by faith in Christ alone, without works, indicate a lack of genuine

conversion? The review of literature concluded that genuine converts show evidence of their belief in Jesus Christ as Savior by throwing off sin's mastery, depending totally upon Christ, and submitting obediently to the rule of Christ over their lives (Dever, 2012, pp. 58-64). Faithful church attendance, seeking heavenly treasure, and maintaining moral control over one's own body describe the practices of a genuine convert (Duggar, 1960, p. 46). Notice that neither Dever (2012) nor Duggar (1960) characterized genuine conversion by one's ability to communicate details of theological dogma.

Overwhelmingly, participants in the current study did present evidence of genuine conversion as described by Dever (2012) and Duggar (1960). New converts testified to significant changes in their lives since their conversions. For example, Findings 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 19 revealed that new convert participants love God's people, attend church regularly, look forward to biblical teaching, hope to share their testimonies with others, attempt to improve how they speak and treat others, abstain from alcohol and substance abuse, and aspire to teach, serve, and lead others in the church as they mature spiritually. When considering the evidence favoring participants' genuine conversions, the researcher concluded two implications of the fifth finding. First, new converts simply do not understand the role of good works in the Christian life. Second, new converts do not possess an extensive vocabulary of church jargon.

Lunceford (n. d.), considered it "a great imperative for every believer . . . to gain an understanding of the basic doctrines of our faith" (p. 71). The review of literature further discovered that authors encouraged the use of new member classes to ensure that attendees experienced genuine conversion (Herring, 1996, p. 5; Logan, 1989, p. 113; Rainer, 2001, p. 112). Authors even warned churches not to assume that everyone

attending a newcomer class already possessed genuine conversion (Heck, 1988, p. 16; Herring, 1996, p. 4). McIntosh (2006) called for new believer classes that focused upon the basics of salvation, assurance of salvation, and other initial aspects of being a follower of Christ (p. 140). Waggoner (2008) concluded:

> No one expects a new convert to understand fully all the Bible's essential teachings. However, we can legitimately expect that, within a reasonable period of time, a Christian will learn and embrace the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. Far too many churchgoers hang around the Christian faith for long periods of time without making appropriate advances in their knowledge of God's word. (p. 31)

The literature supports the importance of churches to utilize new member classes and other assimilation strategies to ensure that new converts not only assent to teaching intellectually but also embrace it as part of their theological convictions.

Churches Should Prepare to Develop Family-like Relations with New Converts

The sixth finding determined that new converts look forward to becoming part of a family-like fellowship. Quotations from nine participating new converts reflected their enthusiasm for developing family-like relations with people in the church. For example, Participant 4 affirmed that "everybody just takes care of everybody. They're there and it's just like you're all a family." Referring to fellow church members, Participant 19 considered "some of them are just like brothers and sisters." For Participant 15, "just knowing that I was part of a Christian family is what I really looked forward to. Saying I was part of it." The church's welcome to Participant 5 "made it final. If they accepted me, I was truly part of the family and I could be with the church family."

According to Jackson (1986), church membership demonstrates one's identity with Christ and brings dignity and honor by affiliating individuals with the greatest of all institutions. Such greatness comes to the church because of Christ's blood and divine authorization for the church to carry out Christ's commission (pp. 23-26). While Jackson's words convey legitimate and biblical aspirations, new converts in the current study focused less upon Christ and His commission than they did upon the desire for familial relations within the church. For example, Participant 24 felt that "being baptized would be a major part of me becoming a part of [the church], becoming a full member and I wanted to become a part of a fine group of people." No converts used terminology similar to that of Jackson to describe having personal identities with Christ. Neither did new converts use language that confirmed their desires to fulfill Christ's commission. In other words, new converts seemed more cognizant of church family and fellowship than they did with details of fulfilling Christ's commission.

Similarly, the tenth finding revealed the influence of kindness as a factor in the long-term retention of new converts in the church. The finding agreed with the literature over the significance of developing personal relations between new converts and existing church members. Both leaders and new converts valued such relationships for assimilation and long-term retention. Speaking of his church, Participant 12 claimed that "the way you're treated, you don't want to leave." Participant 8 affirmed that her church is "really the only church I can actually see myself at because I've gotten so used to going there and the people there, like, they're all so nice." Leader 2 discovered that "with the new believers . . . the thing they're hungriest for [is] someone who will care for them and help them grow."

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Such excerpts agree with the literature. Stetzer & Dobson (2007) stressed the necessity of stable church members connected with each other for the long-term as essential for closing the proverbial back door of churches (p. 130). Friendship with others, personal relationships, and personal care are essential for assimilating new members (Bocock, 2011, p. ii; Hunter, 2009, p. 31; McIntosh & Martin, 1992, pp. 75-86; Rainer, 1993, p. 282; Rushing, 2007, p. 120; Yount, 1996, p. 16). Stuzman (1990) considered the development of relationships in church as the key to successful nurture of new believers (p. 59). Rainer and Rainer (2008) recognized the character of essential churches to encourage long-term church relationships by ensuring the connection of new members with others in the church (p. 147).

Hemphill and James (2011) considered hospitality at every level the key to assimilation and determined that church members seek a friend rather than a friendly church (pp. 20-24). New converts used the term friendly church throughout the current study but described their decisions to stay long-term as the result of actual friendship. Churches and leaders should maximize efforts to create genuine friendships within the church by encouraging acts of kindness. For example, new converts appreciated kindness, invitations to visit the homes of church members, and other opportunities to connect. After referring to the people at her church as "so nice," Participant 8 declared, "I know it's supposed to be like that at every church, but just because it's supposed to doesn't mean it will." Churches that present friendliness on a surface level likely miss opportunities to initiate genuine friendships.

Churches Should Emphasize the Bible for New Converts' Spiritual Growth

New converts expressed eagerness to learn from the Bible and welcomed

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consistent preaching and teaching that emphasized the Bible. New converts also looked forward to spiritual growth through which they could become teachers and help others.

Churches should preach and teach with consistent biblical emphasis.

Findings 7 and 12 revealed that new converts look forward to receiving Bible teaching as part of their spiritual growth and assimilations into the church. Fifteen new converts mentioned anticipating Bible preaching and teaching. Works reviewed in Chapter 2 recognized that new converts need help and encouragement in understanding the Bible (Laurie, 1999, p. 153; Wilhoit, 2008, p. 124). The writer of Hebrews 5:12-6:3 also validated the biblical intent for believers themselves to mature spiritually by learning to partake of God's Word (Cole, 2009, p. 82; Thompson, 2008, pp. 128-129). Participants in the current study clearly expressed enthusiasm for learning the Bible and supported their leaders' efforts to present biblically-based messages. For example, Participant 16 said the "key word is I love it . . . the messages preached from the preacher are on time every time and it's not dull . . . I'm excited to hear what God's got to tell me that day."

Preaching that comes "from the Bible" keeps Participant 18 attending his current church. For Participant 27, though developing friendships made a "big step" in his assimilation, "I guess the main thing is through the Bible study and the word being preached." Likewise, Participant 24 determined that "the Bible message is important. You know these are the things we've got to be aware of that we've got to comply with to be a good Christian, follow the Bible." In contrast to "feel good" sermons, Participant 18 shared his preference for sermons that tell listeners "both sides of the story" in that "if you're not saved and you're not living a Christian life, there's a fiery hell for you . . . it's all from the Bible. Everything here comes from the Bible." Such statements demonstrate

the agreement of new converts with the review of literature that conversion demands individuals to believe the gospel message and turn from their sin and self-centeredness. For example, Dever (2005) affirmed that "fundamentally, everyone needs forgiveness. We need spiritual life. To present the gospel less radically than this is to ask for false conversions and increasingly meaningless church membership" (p. 24).

Churches should help new converts move from learners to teachers. The twelfth finding recognized specific areas related to anticipated spiritual growth including increased Bible learning, reaching out to others, and teaching or leading. New converts shared their hopes of increasing Bible knowledge so they could use such knowledge in helping others. Such desire agrees with the literature found on assimilation. For example, Allen (2010) considered Hebrews 5:12 the introduction of "a contrast between what the readers are and what they should be. Because they have been Christians long enough, they should by now be able to teach others" (p. 335). The implication sustains the expected process of growth from a babe on milk to an adult on solid food (Allen, 2010, p. 337; Guthrie, 1983, p. 134; Johnson, 2006, p. 153; Thompson, 2008, p. 130). According to Johnson (2006), Hebrews 5:12 clearly teaches that "maturity is marked by progress from student to teacher" (p. 155). Shenk and Stutzman (1988) agreed that as expressed in the passage, "maturity is measured by one's ability to live effectively as a Christian and teach others to do so" (p. 151). Moyer (1994) also suggested that the goal of spiritual maturity enables an individual "to become a leader in a local church teaching others how to live for Christ" (p. 347).

New converts in the current study looked forward to such things and eagerly anticipated learning the Bible so they could help others. Four leaders and seven

participating new converts anticipated teaching or leadership roles related to the spiritual growth of new converts. For example, Participant 4 illustrated her own spiritual infancy as requiring someone "to hold my hand." In contrast, she hoped to mature "to where those new converts, I need to be the one holding their hand and I need to have the tools and the verses and everything ready as a mature Christian to help those new ones." Participant 23 anticipated "teaching Sunday school. Or maybe taking over a small group or ministry group whatever it might be."

Participant 8 hoped to gain confidence in understanding the Bible so that she would "actually be able to like have people ask me questions and be able to answer them." When asked how the church would help her to attain such a level of maturity, she responded, "I'm sure for the most part I'll have to do it on my own." New converts hope to attain such knowledge and the skills necessary to teach, lead, or reach out to others. McKinney (1993) stressed that complete assimilation occurs only when new members actively participate in ministry to others within the church (p. 90). Unfortunately, when asked to describe how their churches were helping them reach self-determined long-range goals for spiritual maturity, new converts answered inconsistently. In other words, even though new converts hoped to become future teachers and leaders, they could not discern how their churches helped them attain such leadership. In fact, new converts seemed unclear as to what their pastors actually wanted them to look like in the future.

Similarly, the eighth finding revealed the hope of new converts to share their testimonies in order to help others. Seven new converts and one leader commented on the issue. For example, Participant 5 indicated "I wish young people wouldn't go through what I did cause I lost a lot of good years . . . one day I would like to be able to give my

testimony." Participant 27 hoped that "if my testimony can save one person from making the decisions I've made or can keep them from making the decisions I've made then God wins." Before his conversion, Participant 25 experienced a series of tragic events within a matter of only a few days. During the interview, an emotional Participant 25 expressed his eagerness to share with others, coming through similar difficulties, his testimony and the fact that "you belong here. Believe it or not, you belong here." The literature did not include references to the importance of new convert testimonies. The finding implies that adult new converts recognize the potential significance of their experiences to influence others from making mistakes or to provide hope for recovery following mistakes made.

Most new converts described things they thought the leaders wanted them to do in the future, such as hold positions of leadership, rather than what they should be in regards to Christian character and discipline. Spiritual disciplines appeared extensively in the literature and included Bible reading, study, meditation, prayer, community, church attendance, evangelism, training, multiplication, worship, service, guidance, and stewardship as essential for spiritual growth (Cobb, 2003, pp. 180-181; Cooper, 2012, pp. 9-321; Gallagher & Newton, 2009, pp. 250-254; Hanks, 2009b, pp. 13-139; Hunneshagen, 2002, p. 192; Kennedy, 1996, p. 106; Terry, 1993, p. 25; Thoman, 2010, pp. 31-32). Dempsey (2008) called for fully surrendered converts committed to the practice of spiritual disciplines in community "and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission" (p. 112). Cobb (2003) encouraged churches to train believers in personal ministry that aided members in Christ discovering spiritual gifts, prayer, Bible study, and personal witnessing (pp. 180-183). Gauntt's (1986) guidebook for new

converts encouraged them to learn about and use spiritual disciplines.

During interviews with the researcher, leaders discussed the importance of discipleship more prominently than they did the development of spiritual disciplines. In contrast, Leader 5 anticipated developing "a way for not only new converts but anybody that's shown to be faithful and can benefit from learning the seven disciplines taught in *DiscipleWay*." Referring to new converts, Leader 2 recognized the need "to find out . . . their giftedness and then be able to find a place for them to eventually make a disciple themselves." Although prominent in the review of literature and amongst leaders interviewed, new converts scarcely spoke of spiritual disciplines or discipleship. Even the emphasis upon increased Bible knowledge focused upon cognitive increases without acknowledging the idea of obtaining such knowledge by participating in the exercise of disciplined Bible study. Such evidence from the current study supports Crawley's (2012) conclusion that within the BMA an adequate "hands-on process whereby new converts develop disciplines that change their lives to be more like Christ is consistently lacking" (p. 57).

The current study's eleventh finding revealed that new converts most often considered positive speech and positive treatment of others a sign of spiritual maturity. For example, Participant 20 believed that mature Christians "put other people first and the first person on their list is Jesus." Participant 28 shared the necessity of "building yourself up and helping other people build their lives up instead of tearing them down." Participant 24 agreed and described a mature believer as one "respecting the people around you . . . being honest with people." Such actions certainly reflect the character of Christ; however, the literature identified discipleship as the principle mission of the

church and all functions of the church, such as worship, evangelism, teaching, missions, and fellowship (McIntosh, 2006, pp. 176-177; Shirley, 2008, p. 216). Lorick (2013) stressed the charge of Jesus Christ "to reproduce other disciples. As pastors and leaders, we must ensure the intentional discipleship of new believers" (p. 172). Implications of the eleventh finding include the realization that new converts have yet to comprehend the concept of discipleship and the role of spiritual disciplines in their lives.

Recognize the Fears of New Converts that Hinder Assimilation

The ninth finding related to particular fears or misunderstanding such as a new convert's fear of water, fear of crowds, fear of commitment, and misunderstanding of tithing. Both new converts and leaders described these as reasons for new convert hesitations to join church. Leader 7 recalled that "I've come to find that some people are afraid of water, especially some of our older people that have been saved and come for baptism . . . the fact that they have to go under the water." Leader 4 recalled a woman who expressed her fear by saying, "I'm deathly afraid of water. I don't even put 2 inches in the bathtub." Participant 20 told her pastor, "I don't do under water." Likewise Participant 22 shared with her pastor, "I'm afraid of the water." Leaders remedied such fears by assuring converts they would not force them under water and that they could invite trusted individuals, usually a relative of the new convert, to join them in the baptistery pool for an extra measure of safety.

New converts also hesitated to receive baptism and church membership because they feared being in front of a crowd. For example, Participant 7 shared that his only hesitation in joining the church came simply because he did not "like to stand up in front of large crowds of people." Similarly, Participant 18 expressed a "little bit of

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nervousness about baptism itself and getting out front." Bashfulness caused Participant 10 to resist baptism and church membership because "I don't like getting up in front of groups." Regarding new converts and church attendees, Participant 14 encouraged leaders "to show genuine love and concern for that person . . . be heartfelt . . . don't call them out until they're ready to be called out . . . Don't make them the center of attention, you know, in the church unless you feel like they want to be."

Although not foremost in the current study, three converts expressed concern over the meaning of tithing and its role in joining the church. Participant 19 came from a non-Baptist background and expressed unfamiliarity with the concept. Participant 22 also came from a different background and shared with the pastor her concern over tithing. Though not related specifically to tithing, Participant 7 hesitated joining the church because he "was completely clueless on, you know, I didn't know if you had to pay the church to get baptized, I didn't know nothing about it. I even asked that crazy question." According to Participant 22, leaders responded to such questions with understanding. After telling the pastor of her discomfort, due mostly to the expense of moving a far distance prior to her conversion, "he understood that . . . he eased my conscience. He said, 'Fine, fine' and didn't go any further with it."

In contrast to the fears of water, crowds, and misunderstanding of financial obligations expressed by new converts, leaders concluded that new converts resisted the commitment involved in receiving baptism and church membership. The ninth finding demonstrated a vast difference of opinion between new converts and leaders. When asked what new converts resist about church membership, Leaders 1, 2, 6, and 7 recognized commitment as the main hesitation. For example, Leader 2 considered

"commitment . . . that's probably the hardest thing to get from people." Leader 2 specified that both new converts and existing believers struggle with committing life's priorities, finances, and time attending church as reasons for hesitation. Leader 6 understood the perspective of new converts that "there's so much to church life and it can be very overwhelming."

Interestingly, new converts attended church regularly and most had some role of service within the church. The researcher asked senior pastors from each church to recommend new converts for the current study. Pastors selected new converts they deemed well assimilated into their churches. When answering questions regarding new convert hesitations, perhaps leaders actually thought of and referred to non assimilated members, those not recommended for the current study, rather than the assimilated members recommended for the research. At a minimum, church leaders should consider the possibility that they may misinterpret new converts' hesitations for following through with baptism and church membership.

Church Leaders Should Evaluate the Effectiveness of Classes

The current study's thirteenth finding revealed another contrast between the perspectives of new converts and leaders in the church. When asked to describe how new converts knew what to do following conversion and baptism, six leaders referred to the church's use of classes while 14 new converts referred to their personal observations of others as the primary means of learning what to do next. The input of leaders coincided with the literature. For example, Leader 5 used a new member class to discuss salvation, church ordinances, means for growth, and basics of Bible and prayer. Leader 7 referred to a "short class . . . that gives the general structure of our church . . . history of the

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church and I also acquaint them with the BMA." The literature agreed that classes should emphasize high expectations and include attention to doctrine, polity, constitutions, ordinances, discipline policies, expectations, denominational history, tithing, membership requirements, and ministry opportunities (Rainer, 2001, p. 112; Rainer & Rainer, 2008, pp. 216-217). The current study also affirmed the view of Lawless (2005) who concluded from his research that church leaders favored new member classes as a means of communicating church expectations (pp. 32-33).

Similarly, Robinson (1997) believed that new converts particularly need to learn what it means to be a Christian and that every church should develop "some kind of new member orientation and assimilation plan" (p. 202). Although five churches in the current study utilized new member classes, 14 of the new converts referred mostly to personal observations rather than classes as their means for learning what to do after conversion. Following her conversion, Participant 8 "started asking people . . . 'Okay, I got baptized and I got saved. What am I supposed to do now?'" A friend's mother told her, "'Well, you really don't have a thing that you have to do. You just kind of go with the flow.' That still kind of confuses me." Participants 19 and 20 credited their "watching others" as how they learned what to do next.

The review of literature concluded that new converts need immediate follow up because they may not grasp the full meaning of their decisions and have no idea what to do next (Lorick, 2013, p. 93; Searcy & Henson, 2009, pp. 154-155). With new believers, "focus on getting their questions answered and getting them connected" (Searcy & Henson, 2009, p. 155). Likewise, the literature encouraged church leaders to prepare for immediate assimilation efforts by answering questions related to what they want a new

believer to do in the first hour after becoming a follower of Jesus, to receive within a day of becoming a follower of Jesus, and what steps they hope he or she will take during the first month of becoming a follower of Jesus. Leaders should also affirm a plan for discipleship of the new believer (Searcy & Henson, 2009, p. 156).

The current study affirmed the desire of new converts to have questions answered. Participant 19 approached the pastor with questions regarding tithing and other matters related to displays of wealth. Participant 22 appreciated home visits from a gentleman who answered her questions about bible teaching "or just anything we had to ask him, he just went right along, you know, stopped everything and explained it." When finished teaching the church's doctrinal statement in the new member class, Leader 7 makes time "to see if they have any questions." Leader 1 consistently seeks to let new converts know "I'm available if you have any questions or need anything."

The current study did not indicate that new converts resist learning from classes. In fact, new converts seemed to appreciate it when churches did provide such classes; however, two-thirds of new converts pointed to personal observation rather than classes for actually helping them know what to do after conversion and baptism. Such finding implies a need for churches and leaders to evaluate the success of their classes. Do sound educational techniques compliment effective teaching and ample class content? The finding should also cause leaders to research how new converts in their churches came to learn what to do after conversion and ignore any presumptions of success. Church leaders should prepare for assimilation efforts as described in the literature by planning what they want new converts to do in the first hour, day, and month of conversion (Searcy & Henson, 2009, p. 156).

Churches Need Intentional Processes for Assimilating New Converts

Milburn (2007) determined that churches often lack clear intentions, thus, fail to develop new converts in areas of spiritual growth, formation, and leadership (p. 92). Likewise, Lowe (2011) concluded that many churches fall short of "active, well-designed, intentional plans to accomplish spiritual growth" (p. 1). Moyer (1994) suggested that enabling individuals to become leaders in the local church should climax efforts toward spiritual maturity (p. 347). In the current study, new converts expressed eagerness to mature spiritually. The current study also affirmed the findings of Rainer et al. (2010) which concluded that the BMA possessed no formal means of accomplishing discipleship within its churches and "the problem is that people in the BMA are not practicing discipleship. Over 40% of people in the BMA state that their local churches do not have a formal discipleship process" (p. 37).

According to the fourteenth finding, new converts in the current study did believe their churches possessed intentional processes for assimilating new converts but few could identify or describe the actual strategies used to assimilate in their churches. It appeared that new converts interpreted purposeful efforts to reach them as intentional. Participants 24 and 4 described the new convert positions best. For example, Participant 24 shared that he "really never felt that they . . . had a plan of assimilating me. I didn't feel that there was a plan in motion. I feel it was a sincere welcoming and they liked me." Following the presentation of a Gideon Bible, new converts at Participant 4's church receive a "certificate but that's not like new convert class or something like that; nothing like that; nothing intentionally for the new convert."

Roberts (2008) called for church leaders to turn converts into disciples by creating

a culture of transformation and behavioral change rather than the simple passing along of information (p. 148). Leader 5 agreed and envisioned guiding faithful new converts toward the idea that "their job as a Christian is to encourage others to discipleship." For McKinney (1993), intentional processes required steps for educating, enfolding, enabling, and evaluating each new member's progress (pp. 86-89). Waggoner (2008) defined discipleship as an intentional and mandated process of moving believers toward spiritual maturity and the emphatic understanding that Christ required his church to produce disciples (p. 14). For Dunahoo (2005), life-transformation necessitates intentional processes that cannot be limited to pulpit or haphazard approaches to discipleship (p. xi). Dissimilarly, Leader 1 shared that for new converts in his church, "It's pretty much the preaching [where] I think that they get it." Leader 1 also contrasted his smaller church with larger ones and acknowledged no established strategy in his church for assimilating new converts, "I think in a larger church they have classes, discipleship training classes and things like that. It's kind of more structured." For Osborne (2008), effective principles of assimilation applied to both small and large churches (pp. 21-22).

Churches Should Use Preaching and Small Groups to Assimilate New Converts

Even with a lack of intentional assimilation processes in most churches, the current study's fifteenth finding indicated that new convert assimilation benefits from the efforts of churches and leaders most particularly through preaching, classes or small groups, and the example of leaders. Seven participants identified preaching and teaching, primarily of the Bible, as essential to their assimilation experiences. Leaders interviewed also agreed with the importance of biblical preaching and teaching. For Leader 5, new

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convert assimilation begins when converts receive "a steady diet of expository teaching and preaching." Likewise, Leader 7 concluded that "our main focus has got to be that the word is preached and the word is taught." Participant 27 appreciated his pastor's "ability to preach the word and literally put it out there where I understand it."

Finding 15 illustrates the importance of preaching to the assimilation of new converts and agrees with the literature related to biblical obligations for a church. For example, Colossians 1:28 referenced a threefold leadership strategy for developing spiritually mature followers of Christ. The first fold focused on preaching (MacArthur, 1992; Moo, 2008; O'Brien, 1982); however, Cole (2005) warned readers of the consequences generated when churches tend to tell new converts they cannot fend for themselves, "We now have a church full of baby geese, with their mouths wide open every Sunday waiting to be fed" (p. 131). Although Dunahoo (2005) believed that life-transformation "cannot be limited to pulpit or haphazard approaches to discipleship," leaders and new converts in the current study relied extensively upon pastors' pulpit ministries. The finding and accompanying literature imply the significance of preaching balanced with the efforts to prevent new converts' dependency upon pastors for the depth of their spiritual nourishment. Both new converts and leaders in the current study emphasized their interests in biblically-focused preaching and teaching in contrast to what Participant 18 identified as feel good sermons.

Another emphasis with the fifteenth finding affirmed the value of small groups in the assimilation process. When asked to describe how the church effectively assimilated new converts in the present and for future spiritual growth, fifteen participants, eight new converts and all seven leaders, pointed to the use of classes or small groups. Participants

emphasized the opportunities made available by such classes and groups for asking questions and interaction with others. In the review of literature, Putman (2010) stressed three keys to Christ's successful disciple making: intentional leadership, a relational environment, and a learnable and repeatable process centered upon the use of small groups (p. 35). Although participants in the current study agreed with the use of classes or small groups, they did not mention learnable and repeatable processes during the interviews.

Leaders Should Develop Leaders via Exemplary Leadership

Review of the literature concluded the essential focus of assimilation strategies that develop new converts into leaders (Moyer, 1994, p. 347; Shenk & Stutzman, 1988, p. 169). Durey (2002) encouraged the involvement of new believers in actual ministry as a requirement for assimilation. As revealed by Finding 12, four leaders and seven new converts anticipated spiritual growth in the church that prepared converts for future teaching or leadership roles. In fact, new converts looked forward to taking such roles. Although leadership development appeared in the literature, so did concern for the effectiveness of current leaders. For example, Oswald and Leas (1987) considered a pastor's ability to generate enthusiasm as the key to healthy churches and assimilation of newcomers (pp. 17, 25, 28). Stetzer and Dodson (2007) agreed that leadership must be proactive, shared, and developed (pp. 39-50).

Hatmaker (2011) encouraged a reproducible process through which leaders willingly let go and release others for ministry. When churches neglect to release others they kill "our hope of becoming disciples who make disciples" (pp. 110-111). Leader 2 expressed an ongoing struggle with not "letting go." He recognized that if "I can let go of

and clear off my plate, the more healthy the church will be . . . more opportunities for people, but also, I'm not as stressed out and overwhelmed as I am now." For Scott (2001), leaders can gain time for their schedules by equipping laypersons for leadership (Abstract).

Seven new converts in the current study considered the examples set by church leaders as instrumental in their assimilation experiences. Leader 1 and Leader 3 agreed and discussed the value leaders set by example. For Leader 1, "I think the pastor of the church should be the example . . . they ought to see our faith in action and see us walking by faith and not by sight. If we do that as pastors, I think our churches will follow suit." Participant 11 agreed and stressed that without church leaders, "I wouldn't be the person I am today, the Christian I am today because they've shown the way that I'm supposed to go. Instead of ignoring them or blowing them off, I should take that path and become a better man." For Participant 15, the associate pastor at his church regularly speaks "good to me and trying to give me examples of how to share with people. They've been good influences in my life."

Leaders Should Continue Current Assimilation Strategies

Finding 16 revealed that the perceptions of new converts and leaders differ regarding the effectiveness of current assimilation strategies in the church. Nineteen new converts believed that their church leaders led effectively in assimilating new converts and encouraged the continuation of current leadership strategies related to assimilation. Although all seven leaders in the current study recognized the critical nature of leadership for assimilating new converts, they also recognized the need for improvement in their ministries. For example, Leader 3 felt that without leadership new converts

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would "fall by the wayside." Similarly, Leader 6 believed new converts "would be lost." Leader 2 agreed that leadership "is absolutely critical to the development of healthy Christians" but also confessed his ineffectiveness to delegate and develop leaders. Leader 3 shared further that busyness often prevents him from addressing attrition.

Church Leaders Should Make Themselves Available to New Converts by Person and Electronic Means

Finding 17 revealed that eleven new converts considered the availability of leaders to meet with them in person or by electronic means as meaningful to assimilation. Participant 23 shared that a leading staff member "actually called me and just wanted to meet with me and I was . . . at that point in my life where I had lots of questions and I was searching for answers." Searcy and Henson (2009) encouraged leaders to "focus on getting their [new converts'] questions answered and getting them connected. Make sure the forward momentum continues and no one falls through the cracks" (p. 155). Participant 10 advised church leaders of the benefit for "just letting [new converts] know that you're here for them." Participant 2 appreciated the fact that "if you need to talk to somebody, you can call them up. You're not alone when you're out here."

Six new converts and two leaders mentioned the benefit of texting for assimilation. For example, both Participant 7 and Participant 23 seemed to enjoy receiving texts from leaders or church members that simply asked, "How are you doing?" or "Can we pray for you?" In contrast, leaders expressed their struggles to balance the amount of availability they provide for new converts. For example, Leader 7 did not want to appear "over zealous." Leader 1 did not want to "run them off" by

putting undue pressure and formality upon contacts with new converts; however, new converts clearly appreciated the texts. Oddly, not one single new convert mentioned a church's use of social media as influential in conversion or beneficial for assimilating them into the church. Similarly, neither the use of texting nor social media sites appear significantly in the review of literature.

Churches Should Provide Immediate Opportunities for New Converts to Serve and Learn

Finding 19 determined that new converts tend to enter service when churches provide them with ample opportunities to serve. Participant 3 recognized the value of helping people relate by "getting them involved in something. They always have to be involved. I figured that out." She also warned leaders of the risks of not getting new converts involved in something "as quick as they can." New converts seemed eager to serve the church. Ten new converts reported serving meals or snacks to church youth, providing meals to bereaved individuals, and performing physical plant maintenance. Though leaders spoke most often about such tasks as entry level, new converts did not appear offended by the opportunities. Leader 2 hoped to use such positions to help new converts discover their spiritual gifts and to demonstrate willingness to serve.

Hanks (1993) encouraged quick assimilation of new converts and believed that when churches delay, they increase attrition rates (p. 101). Likewise, Lawless (2005) emphasized getting new members involved in service while the "fire is still hot" as a preventative to non involvement (p. 43). Interestingly, most of the literature reviewed promoted the immediate involvement of new converts in spiritual acts of service such as evangelistic outreach (Hunter, 2009, p. 62). Donahue and Gladen (2010) considered it

common for believers to lose non-Christian friends over time, thus emphasizing the urgency for new converts to evangelize their friends (p. 26). The literature also promoted immediate theological study. Dunahoo (2005) believed that theological and doctrinal study should permeate the entire assimilation process (p. 82). Lunceford (n. d.) considered it "a great imperative for every new believer . . . to gain an understanding of the basic doctrines of our faith" (p. 71). The researcher observed that new converts in the current study indicated a desire for nothing less.

<div align="center">**Recommendations**</div>

The researcher formulated the following recommendations based upon the conclusions established by his analysis of both the literature and participant interviews.

Recommendations for Churches and Pastors

The current study revealed that new converts accepted invitations to attend church from individuals with whom they had close relations. No convert mentioned attending church as the result of an invitation from someone they did not know, with the exception of a maintenance person working at a participant's home. The researcher recommends that churches encourage members to invite their friends, family, and neighbors to attend church and prepare members to do so. The current study also discovered that new converts credited church leaders with providing assistance during the actual conversion process and made no mention of those who invited them to church as essential to their conversions. The researcher recommends that churches make effort to equip those who invite new comers to share the gospel without an apparent dependence upon church leaders.

Similarly, the researcher recommends that churches evaluate the nature of

friendliness extended by their members to new comers and new converts to ensure that members offer more than just surface level greetings of friendliness but extend opportunities for developing authentic friendships with new converts. The current study found that new converts looked forward to becoming part of a family-like fellowship and attributed acts of kindness by leaders and church members as key to their decisions to remain long-term members of their churches.

The proximity of major life events to the conversion experiences of new converts included numerous incidents of alcoholism. The researcher recommends that church leaders prepare themselves and their congregations for effective ministry to new converts attempting to leave lifestyles of addiction. Recognizing the importance of replacing destructive behaviors with encouraging ones, the researcher also recommends that church leaders develop or utilize existing and proven strategies for helping new converts to grow in familiarity with and use of spiritual disciplines. New converts in the current study demonstrated genuine conversions as evidenced by regular church attendance, love for God's people, interest in biblical preaching, and changes of behavior; however, new converts seemed unaware of the deeper issues related to spiritual disciplines.

Although new converts felt confident about their assurances of eternal life and demonstrated genuine conversions by their changed lives, they struggled to articulate basic tenets of the gospel related to their conversions. When asked how they would respond to a question from God that asked, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" only five new converts initially gave a faith-based answer in contrast to a works-based answer. Assuming that churches and leaders prefer more definitively faith-based answers from church members, the researcher recommends that churches and leaders evaluate the

effectiveness of their teaching methods as they relate to theological issues regarding conversion or salvation. Evaluation should focus particularly on the success of advancing new converts, or other church members, beyond mere intellectual assent to authentic interaction with and conviction of theological beliefs.

The researcher further recommends that leaders not presume that simply preaching a sermon or teaching a lesson on such subjects adequately educates new converts so they become capable of explaining conversion and its application to real life. Such issues likely require repeated presentations to ensure effective teaching occurs. In addition to new converts' inability to articulate a faith-based gospel, new converts professed confusion over the role of deacons in their churches. New converts also lacked a clear understanding of what church leaders expected them to become in the future and did not comprehend a Great Commission mindset as presented in the review of literature.

New converts in the current study recognized the potential for their experiences to influence others from making mistakes or to provide hope for recovery following mistakes made; therefore, the researcher recommends that church leaders assist new converts in developing their testimonies and provide opportunities for them to share so that they might help individuals with similar life circumstances.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

The researcher delimited the current study's population to churches affiliated with the BMA. The nature of qualitative research prohibits the generalization of results (Creswell, 2013, p. 101); however, the current research addressed a gap in knowledge for both BMA and non-BMA churches. The researcher followed the current study's proposed methodology and attempted to enhance the current study's trustworthiness by

creating a research design that would permit future researchers to replicate with new converts outside the BMA (Pyrczak, 2008, p. 145). The researcher recommends that future researchers repeat the current study among non BMA church populations in an effort to verify the application of findings to a broader range of new converts and churches.

Following the proposed methodology and action plan for the current study, the researcher contacted senior pastors within BMA churches that met prescribed criteria. The resulting sample provided participants exclusively representing White church members. The review of literature assumed the appropriateness of understanding Christ's commission as relevant to all disciples of all ages based upon Christ's authority and promise to be with the disciples until the end of the world (Boice, 2001, p. 646; Hagner, 1995, p. 889; MacArthur, 1989, p. 346). The literature also affirmed the intent of Christ's commission to include all ethnicities rather than nations limited by geographical boundaries (Kim, 2005, p. 1; McGavran & Arn, 1981, p. 112; Stetzer & Putman, 2006, p. 34). Therefore, the researcher recommends that future researchers use similar studies to gather the input of new converts representing more ethnically diverse populations to determine the effectiveness of assimilation strategies for all new converts.

The current study invited new converts to describe their experiences of assimilation into church. Senior pastors identified each participating new convert as an assimilated member of the church and each participating new convert felt assimilated. Leader 1 shared his experience of seeing individuals "make a profession of faith and get baptized. You look up a month later and you never see them again. I just feel like the church should be more responsible than that." Rainer and Rainer (2008) surveyed church

dropouts between the ages of 18-22 and determined a national average that young adults account for 70% of all dropouts. Rainer et al. (2010) conducted quantitative research of the BMA and found that only 19% of survey respondents claimed to have dropped out of church for more than six months. Thirty-five percent of BMA dropouts ranged in ages between 18 and 22 years (pp. 27-30). Regardless of statistical disparity between BMA and non BMA dropouts, the researcher recommends that future researchers seek the input of new converts, baptized within the past one to three years, who dropped out or failed to assimilate within the church for the purpose of exploring their experiences of non assimilation. Perhaps such a study can corroborate the phenomenon described by the current research or discover contrasts that foster improved understanding of where churches, leaders, or assimilation strategies err in retaining new converts.

Thirteen new converts in the current study described the proximity of major life events to their experiences of conversion; however, the review of literature did not address potential correlations between such events and conversion. Based on the finding, the researcher concluded that churches and leaders should both maintain a presence in the lives of individuals during times of crises and prepare for compassionate ministry to those exiting major life events, especially those related to addictions such as alcoholism. The researcher recommends that future researchers examine the potential correlation between major life events and spiritual conversion and provide suggestions for how churches, leaders, or organizations can minister most effectively to individuals during and after crises or other major life events.

Finding that new converts attended church at the invitation of church members with whom they had close relations should encourage church members and leaders to

continue inviting people to church. New converts described the inclusion and influence of church leaders in their actual conversion experiences; however, descriptions did not include reference to the involvement of those laypersons who invited participants to church. The researcher concluded that church members abstained from presentations of the gospel and relied upon leaders to share the good news. The literature review discovered sources that promote the intent of personal witnessing by all believers (Cobb, 2003, pp. 180-185; Dunahoo, 2005, p. 43). The researcher recommends that future researchers investigate why few laypersons actually participate in the conversion experiences of those they invite to church.

The current study asked participating new converts to describe their hesitations of receiving baptism and church membership. Participant responses included fear of water, fear of being in front of a crowd, and misunderstandings about tithing as reasons for hesitation. Leaders believed that new converts hesitated to receive baptism and church membership because of an unwillingness to make commitments. In response, the researcher recommends that future researchers consider the distinction between the perspectives of new converts and leaders on the subject of why new converts resist baptism and church membership. Future researchers could broaden the subject matter to include other areas in which leaders and laypersons hold separate perspectives.

Research that focused upon adult new converts implies a lifetime of resistance to conversion, baptism, and church membership. Table 5 displayed that in the current study, fifteen participating new converts had received baptism and church membership prior to their baptisms as adults. The researcher recommends that future researchers ask adult new converts why they resisted conversion for so long to determine if church evangelism

or outreach strategies can improve and assist individuals earlier in life. The researcher also recommends that future studies contrast prior and recent conversion experiences to discern the probable strengths or weaknesses exhibited by ministerial leaders during the prior pseudo-conversion experiences of recent converts.

The researcher observed in his conclusions for the current study that new converts appreciated the availability of church leaders to meet with them in person or by electronic means. In the specific concluding remarks, the researcher noted the conspicuous absence of any reference to social media. The review of literature focused upon assimilation of new converts and also lacked substantial reference to social media as a profitable means for influencing either conversion or assimilation. Participants in the current study received baptism within the past one to three years, a high point in the period of social media popularity. The researcher anticipates future researchers will have interest in studying the effects of social media upon various aspects of ministry, including evangelistic outreach and strategies for assimilating new converts. Considering such prospective research, the researcher recommends that future studies include the findings of the current study that supported genuine conversion and assimilation without use of social media.

Leader 5 shared that "I'd love to see each of our church members trained in *DiscipleWay* and able to take others through *DiscipleWay*." Cooper (2012) edited the BMA's *DiscipleWay* material designed to assist pastors and local churches in disciple making. Development of the material came at the request of BMA associational leaders attempting to enhance membership in BMA churches by creating a relational and intentional strategy for making disciples (Crawley, 2012, p. 57). As disclosed in Chapter

1, the researcher served as content manager for the development of *DiscipleWay*, thus limiting the probability for him to conduct unbiased research upon the effectiveness of *DiscipleWay* as a means to enhance membership in churches. As a result, the researcher recommends that future researchers evaluate the success of *DiscipleWay* to accomplish its stated objectives. The researcher suggests quantitative research to determine if a difference exists in spiritual growth between those trained in *DiscipleWay* and those not trained in *DiscipleWay*.

Spiritual disciplines appeared extensively in the literature and included Bible reading, study, meditation, prayer, community, church attendance, evangelism, training, multiplication, worship, service, guidance, and stewardship as essential for spiritual growth (Cobb, 2003, pp. 180-181; Cooper, 2012, pp. 9-321; Gallagher & Newton, 2009, pp. 250-254; Hanks, 2009b, pp. 13-139; Hunneshagen, 2002, p. 192; Kennedy, 1996, p. 106; Terry, 1993, p. 25; Thoman, 2010, pp. 31-32). Dempsey (2008) called for fully surrendered converts committed to the practice of spiritual disciplines in community "and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission" (p. 112). Although prominent in the literature as essential to assimilation, new converts did not identify spiritual disciplines as key to their own experiences. Neither did new converts project significant growth in spiritual disciplines as part of their future maturing in Christ.

The current study's eleventh finding revealed that new converts most often considered positive speech and positive treatment of others a sign of spiritual maturity. Based upon this finding, the researcher determined that new converts have yet to comprehend the concept of discipleship and the role of spiritual disciplines in their lives. The researcher recommends that future researchers explore why new converts,

considered assimilated into church, do not recognize the importance of spiritual disciplines. Similarly, the researcher recommends that future researchers explore why new converts do not know what their leaders want them to be in the future.

Participant 5 indicated "I wish young people wouldn't go through what I did cause I lost a lot of good years . . . one day I would like to be able to give my testimony." Participant 27 hoped that "if my testimony can save one person from making the decisions I've made or can keep them from making the decisions I've made then God wins." Five other new converts mentioned hopes of sharing their testimonies in order to help others. The literature did not address this issue which may identify a gap in knowledge related to the power of personal testimonies in conversion, assimilation, or spiritual growth. As evidenced by Participant 5's quote above, adult new converts hope to help young people avoid the consequences of mistakes similar to their own. Participants in the current study did not limit themselves to helping youth but anyone of any age to whom they might relate. Based upon the finding, the researcher recommends that future researchers explore the extent of influence contained in adult new convert testimonies to help others avoid the consequences of negative choices.

Summary

The researcher used qualitative phenomenological research to explore the assimilation experiences of adult new converts into churches affiliated with the BMA in order to help ministerial leaders understand what new converts anticipate, welcome, look forward to, or resist regarding their assimilations. The current study included 28 interviews representing seven BMA churches located in the Ark-La-Tex region of the southern United States. Participants included 21 new converts, baptized within the past

one to three years, and a leading staff member from each of the seven churches. The researcher recorded and transcribed interviews, separated excerpts from the interviews into categories, analyzed the data, and determined common themes from the data.

Nineteen findings resulted from the current study. Using literature reviewed for Chapter 2, the researcher determined 14 conclusions that resulted in eight recommendations for churches and church leaders and 14 recommendations for future researchers. Interviews with participants affirmed the movement of God in their lives as evidenced by the significant changes made since conversion. The researcher hopes the current study will encourage churches and leaders to continue effective work they already do while challenging them to consider both the input of new converts through the findings and the researcher's conclusions and recommendations as probable insights into the realities of assimilating adult new converts.

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Church Site Permission Form

Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, Texas 75211

Purpose of the Study
Your church, _____, is being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Philip Attebery from Dallas Baptist University. The purpose of the study is to answer the question: How do adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in Baptist Missionary Association churches, within the past one to three years, describe their experiences of assimilation in the church? This study will contribute to the researcher's dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Norma Hedin, Dissertation Committee Chair, Gary Cook School of Leadership, Dallas Baptist University.

Research Procedures
Should the church decide to participate in this research study, _____ will be asked to assist in selecting a sample of 1 to 3 adults baptized approximately within the previous one to three years (by your church) and one ministry leader familiar with assimilation processes of your church for the researcher to interview. The church will also be asked to provide a location for the one-on-one interviews. Interviews with females should occur in semi-private locations that allow full contribution by the participants while protecting the moral integrity of both the researcher and participant. Semi-private implies the presence of another adult able to observe the interview visually but not audibly. The study consists of two phases. First, the researcher will conduct interviews with selected recently baptized adults and selected ministry leaders. The researcher will record all interviews. Second, the researcher will transcribe the recorded interviews and provide each participant with an email copy to affirm or amend it based upon his or her understanding of the interview.

Time Required
Participation in this study will require 45 minutes to 1 hour for a personal interview with each participant. The study will include a maximum of three new convert interviews and one church staff interview. Participants may also take time to read the written transcripts and provide feedback or verification to the researcher.

Risks
The researcher does not perceive more than minimal risks involved in this study. Interviews with females will occur in semi-private locations that allow full contribution by the participants while protecting the moral integrity of both the researcher and participant. Semi-private implies the presence of another adult able to observe the interview visually but not audibly.

Benefits

Neither the church nor participants will receive direct benefits from this study. Hopefully, the experience will encourage all parties in matters related to the assimilation of adult new converts in the church.

Confidentiality

Transcripts and results of the study will be coded in such a way as to avoid the identification of respondents or churches. The researcher retains the rights to use and publish non-identifiable data. All data will be stored in a secure location and may be destroyed after seven years.

Participation & Withdrawal

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Both the church and individuals choosing to participate can withdraw at any time without consequence.

Questions about the Study

At any time, parties with questions regarding the study can request additional information (including a copy of the results) by contacting one or all of the following:

Researcher
Philip Attebery
Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary
1530 East Pine/P. O. Box 670
Jacksonville, Texas, 75766
philip.attebery@bmats.edu or (903) 586-2501

Chair, Dissertation Committee
Dr. Norma Hedin
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway,
Dallas, TX 75211
nhedin@bhcarroll.edu or (817) 274-4284

Questions about Your Rights as a
Research Participant
Dr. Suzanne Kavli
Professor of Research and Leadership
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway,
Dallas, TX 75211
suek@dbu.edu or (214) 333-5381

Giving of Permission

As an official of _____, I have read the information and understand what is being requested of the church as a location for this study. I provide Dallas Baptist University and the researcher unrestricted access to the data collected during the interviews and the permission to present and publish the findings of this study.

_____ Printed Name of Church Official

_____ Signature of Church Official _____ (Date)

_____ Signature of Researcher _____ (Date)

Appendix B

Participant Informed Consent Form

Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, Texas 75211

Thank you for allowing me to come into your place and visit with you today. My name is Philip Attebery. I am a PhD student at Dallas Baptist University and also serve as dean for the Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary in Jacksonville, Texas. I am conducting a research project entitled *Describing the Assimilation Experiences of New Converts: A Phenomenological Study.* So far, I have discovered a lack of research that considers the input of new converts and would like to conduct an interview with you about your experiences of assimilation into the church. Specifically, the discussion will relate to enhancing long-term assimilation and spiritual maturity of adult new converts, 18 years or older, baptized approximately within the past one to three years.

The interview will contribute to dissertation research I am completing for my Ph.D. studies at Dallas Baptist University under the direction of Dr. Norma Hedin. The interview should take about 45 minutes to an hour. I will be taking notes but would also like to record the session to ensure that I get it all. I would also like to provide you with an emailed transcript of our conversation and allow you to check it for accuracy. If you would like to make corrections or changes, you can email those to me.

I selected your church because of its size, location, and the number of baptisms reported in the BMA Directory and Handbook. I selected you because your pastor identified you as an adult baptized within approximately the past one to three years or as a leading staff member. Neither you nor the church will receive direct benefits from this study. Hopefully, the experience will encourage all of us in matters related to the assimilation of adult new converts in the church.

I do not foresee more than minimal risks involved in this study. Your responses will be kept confidential, which means that your church will be unidentifiable and your responses will be shared only in such a way that you are not identified as the respondent. I will not share your responses with anyone at your church. Although this current study is for my dissertation I might also use responses and findings for other writing projects or oral presentations. Let me assure you that your participation is voluntary. You have been gracious to allow me a visit and please remember that you may end the interview at any time or simply pass on items you prefer not to discuss. There is no consequence or penalty for doing so.

Are there any questions you have for me about what I have just shared?

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

Please print and sign your name below if you agree to participate in this study on *Describing the Assimilation Experiences of New Converts: A Phenomenological Study.* I have a copy of this informed consent form for both of us to sign and keep for our records.

_____   _____
Interviewee (Please Print and Sign Name)   Date

_____   _____
Interviewer   Date
Philip Attebery

With questions regarding the study, you can request additional information, including a copy of the results, by contacting me at the address above or one or all of the following:

Researcher
Philip Attebery
P.O. Box 670 or 1530 East Pine
Jacksonville, TX 75766
philip.attebery@bmats.edu or 903-586-2501

Chair, Dissertation Committee
Dr. Norma Hedin
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211
nhedin@bhcarroll.edu or (817) 274-4284

Questions about Your Rights as a Research
Participant
Dr. Suzanne Kavli
Professor of Research and Leadership
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211
suek@dbu.edu or (214) 333-5381

Appendix C

New Convert Participant Interview Guide

Participant: _____

Participant's email: _____

Interviewer: _____

Location: _____

Date: _____

LOOK FOR STORIES NOT FACTS (Warren, 2002, p. 83)
WHAT THEY EXPERIENCED AND HOW THEY EXPERIENCED IT

Contextual Questions

1. What brought you to this church? How long have you attended _____ church? How often do you attend?

2. Were you baptized approximately 1 to 3 years ago? How important was that to you?

3. I would like to hear you describe the events that led up to your conversion and baptism?

4. Have you come to a place in your spiritual life where you know for certain that if you died today you would go to heaven? Or is that something you would say you are still working on?

5. Suppose God were to ask you "Why should I let you into my heaven?" what would you say?

Research Questions

6. How would you describe an assimilated member of _____ church?
    (Operational definition of *assimilation* for the current study means the retention, disciple making, and leadership development of new converts).

7. How would you describe your assimilation experience into the church?

8. In what ways did the church help you to get involved or assimilated? Was it an intentional process? If so, did the process begin immediately? Do you feel assimilated? How long did it take for you? What really made you feel assimilated?

9. How and when did you know/learn what to do next after your conversion? Your baptism?

10. What did you anticipate or look forward to most about being a member of this church?

11. Was there anything you resisted about being a member of this church?

12. In what ways has the church encouraged you most to stay assimilated for the long-term?

13. Can you give me examples of how you have most actively served the church? Do you have a particular place of service in the church?

14. In what ways has the church assisted you in maturing spiritually?

15. Can you give me an example of how you have developed relationships in the church?

16. How critical has the role of your church leaders been in helping you assimilate into the church? Is there anything you would like your church leaders to know about helping new converts assimilate?

17. From your experience so far, what do you think church leaders want you to look like in ten years? Describe how the church is helping you attain that goal.

Closing

Is there anything more you would like to add?

I'll be analyzing the information you gave me and comparing it with other interviews during the next few weeks. I will prepare a transcript and email it to you. I will compile data and submit a report this summer and, hopefully, earn an enviable grade.

I have enjoyed our visit. Thank you for your time.

Leader Participant Interview Guide

Participant: _____

Participant's email: _____

Interviewer: _____

Location: _____

Date: _____

Contextual Questions

1. What is your position at the church?

2. How long have you been in such a position of leadership at this church?

3. Could you describe the specifics of your role in relation to helping new converts?

Research Questions

4. What does it mean to be a member of _____ church?

5. How important is baptism and church membership to your church and the typical new convert?

6. How would you describe an assimilated member of _____ church?

7. What does the typical new convert anticipate or look forward to about being a member of this church?

8. What does the typical new convert most likely resist about being a member of this church?

9. What encourages new converts most to stay active with _____ for the long-term? [lit says involved]

10. How and when does a new convert know/learn what to do next after his or her conversion? baptism? [welcome]

11. How does a new convert member get involved in _____? Is it an intentional process? If so, does the process begin immediately? How long does it normally take?

12. How would you describe a spiritually mature member of _____church?

13. How does the church assist new converts in reaching spiritual maturity?

14. How critical is the role of leadership in the assimilation of new converts?

15. What biblical foundations obligate a church to assimilate a new convert?

Closing

Is there anything more you would like to add?

I'll be analyzing the information you gave me and comparing it with other interviews during the next few weeks. I will prepare a transcript and email it to you. I will compile and submit my findings this summer.

I have enjoyed our visit. Thank you for your time.

Appendix E

Participant Information Form

Thanks for your interest in serving as a participant for my research project on how adults, aged 18 years and older, baptized as new converts in Baptist Missionary Association churches, within approximately the past one to three years, describe their experiences of assimilation in the church. I will use the information you provide on this form to make certain you meet the criteria needed for the research. Should you meet the criteria, I will contact you about scheduling an appointment for the 45 minute to an hour long interview. The interview will contribute to dissertation research I am completing for my Ph.D. studies at Dallas Baptist University under the direction of Dr. Norma Hedin. Your responses will be kept confidential which means that your responses will be shared only in such a way that you are not identified as the respondent. Thanks again!

Philip Attebery
Dean, BMA Seminary
P.O. Box 670 or 1530 East Pine
Jacksonville, TX 75766
philip.attebery@bmats.edu or 903-586-2501

Chair, Dissertation Committee
Dr. Norma Hedin
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
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nhedin@bhcarroll.edu or (817) 274-4284

Questions about Your Rights as a
Research Participant
Dr. Suzanne Kavli
Professor of Research and Leadership
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211
suek@dbu.edu or (214) 333-5381

Name: _____

Home Address: _____

_____

Phone(s): (home) _____ (work) _____ (cell) _____

E-mail: _____

Best time to call: _____

Please avoid calling at this time(s): _____

Name and location of church you attend: _____

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Appendix F

Pastor's Script for Initial Contact with Participants

Dr. Philip Attebery, Dean of the Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary in Jacksonville, Texas, is conducting PhD research at Dallas Baptist University. The research is entitled: *Describing the Assimilation Experiences of New Converts: A Phenomenological Study.* He is conducting interviews with adults, 18 years or older, who have been baptized approximately within the past one to three years.

Our church meets the size, location, and number of baptisms required for the study and I would like to recommend you as a potential participant for the research. I understand that there is no direct benefit for you or the church by participating in the study.

I can tell you that participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Both you and the church can choose to withdraw at any time without consequence and results of the study will be reported in such a way as to avoid identifying you or the church.

If interested, please complete the Participant Information Form and return it to me within the week. I will provide the completed form to Dr. Attebery and he will confirm your eligibility for the study. If you are eligible, we will schedule a time for interview, preferably at the church, for you to meet with him for 45 minutes to an hour within the next couple of weeks. If necessary, he may also contact you by phone or email.

You can request more information about the study from one or all of the following:

Researcher
Philip Attebery
P.O. Box 670 or 1530 East Pine
Jacksonville, TX 75766
philip.attebery@bmats.edu or 903-586-2501

Chair, Dissertation Committee
Dr. Norma Hedin
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
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Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant
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