



# THE ASSIMILATION ENGINE

Four Processes that Drive How People  
Connect with Your Church

By Dave Bair & Steve Caton



CHURCH COMMUNITY BUILDER

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
What Every Church Leader Needs to Know About Systems	3
Hospitality	4
Information Gathering	5
Follow-Up	7
Connection	9
Conclusion	11
Healthy Churches Maximize the Assimilation Process	11
About the Authors	13



# INTRODUCTION

---

## What Every Church Leader Needs to Know About Systems

Discipleship seems to be top of mind for leaders. But when it comes to assimilation, many check out, believing it's someone else's responsibility. The truth is discipleship and assimilation overlap. You can't disciple someone without a relationship, and the assimilation process facilitates connecting people to your church through relationships. Thus, churches that assimilate well are also likely to create disciples.

There are many definitions for the word assimilation. Let's go ahead and clear this up now: Assimilation is a process, not an event. It is a process whereby we transform our programs, services, and events into connection points to foster human interactions that become the genesis of authentic community.

If assimilation is 'human', why are we talking about systems? Systems help us identify and connect with real people. It is possible for people to join a church without ever connecting with the people and ministries of the church. That's why it's important to view assimilation as a system through which people develop an ever-deepening relationship with God and His work through the church.

The assimilation process begins with a person's first visit to the church (for any reason) and ends when that person becomes connected to and engaged with the people, ministries, and programs that drive the mission. Before that first visit, people become interested in or are invited to the church through evangelism. Following assimilation is the process of growth and discipleship, which might include joining small groups, serving in volunteer capacities, tithing, leading others, or inviting friends. Real life transformation happens with those who are engaged in the community of the church. Assimilation is the opportunity to begin that engagement.

Churches employ a variety of systems designed to help them carry out their mission. The assimilation engine will help move people toward full engagement in the mission and ministries of the church. The assimilation engine includes four basic processes:

**Hospitality**

**Information Gathering**

**Follow-Up**

**Connection**

Let's take a closer look at each of these processes.



# HOSPITALITY

---

Through the hospitality process we make sure people feel welcome. First-time visitors don't know how to find the restrooms, how to check in their kids, how to get to the worship center, etc.

There are two ways to deal with the hospitality issue—passive hospitality and active hospitality. Passive hospitality involves directional signs and maps that make navigating the campus easier. Passive hospitality also includes cleanliness and a clutter-free atmosphere. You can evaluate your passive hospitality through a survey sent to guests or by frequently walking through your facility with the eyes of a first-time visitor.

Active hospitality involves real people who watch for ways to assist anyone entering the facility. New and longtime attenders like to be recognized and greeted. It is easy to be a friendly, effective greeter. However, it is really important to treat new visitors and returning visitors with the same sense of intensity. How effective is your hospitality process? Ask yourself these questions:

- Are we making people feel welcome in our 'home'?
- Are we treating people the same way we would treat them if they showed up at our houses? If we invite someone over to our house, would we meet them at the door or just leave the door open?
- Are we sensitive to the nonverbal communication first-time visitors exhibit?

The average growing church in the United States keeps 16% of all first-time guests and 85% of second-time guests. A great first impression—the first seven minutes of an initial visit—can make the difference between people choosing to return or choosing to visit a different church. Preparation is needed to provide a welcoming and friendly environment that helps turn a first-time guest into a second-time guest and begins the spiritual transformation process.

Recently, Church Community Builder surveyed over 500 churches and over one-third of them stated assimilating new visitors into members was their number one challenge. The Church Community Builder software solution already includes great tools to help this process, so it became clear that churches need more than good tools to meet the challenge of assimilation. Highly effective churches need good systems and processes.

- What are three things visitors would say about their initial experience at your church?
- What are three things you can do this week to improve your hospitality?



# INFORMATION GATHERING

---

Many churches are friendly and are excellent at hospitality. However, many of those churches don't know the names of the people they have welcomed. Capturing information is a critical process, and a process with which churches often struggle.

Church Community Builder advocates capturing information from everyone in attendance. Why? Here are four reasons:

1. People are mobile and their personal information constantly changes. By collecting information from everyone, you can make sure your targeted communication reaches the intended person.
2. It is helpful to know the status of each person attending. Some will be first-time visitors; others will be members. Some people will be confused about their status: They might believe themselves to be members when, in fact, they are simply long-term visitors. Capturing information helps you target membership information to those who need it.
3. People are more likely to express their needs on a card than in person to a staff member. The information captured should give people the opportunity to share prayer requests, needs, ideas, questions, or concerns. They might have a question about membership or baptism. When you capture the information, you open the door for future ministry opportunities.
4. Capturing information from everyone pressures visitors to provide their information. Asking visitors to stand puts them on the spot and might drive some people away. When everyone is providing information, the visitors are more likely to give you the information you need to get them into the assimilation process. In addition to the peer pressure of everyone pausing to fill out the card, this time also allows the motivated visitor to complete the card without feeling alone and awkward.

Churches that gather information discover there are more visitors in attendance than they thought. Typically, the number of guests goes up by multiples of three or four. That means many churches are missing as much as two-thirds of their visitors! Rather than comparing attendance numbers only, churches can identify new visitors as well as people who have changed their attendance patterns. A change in attendance patterns is often a

sign something is happening in that person's life. Recognizing this provides another opportunity to minister.

Why are many churches resistant to gathering information from everyone? Here are some common objections:

1. Connection cards are expensive to print.
2. Connection cards can be time consuming to process weekly.  
In larger churches, it can take two or more support staff a couple of hours to process cards.
3. Church leaders don't believe the members and attenders will participate.  
When the church buys into it, there is a good return rate. Church leaders must explain why gathering the information from everyone is important.
4. Many churches resist doing anything that might make people feel uncomfortable.  
They have the same approach as retail stores. They cater to their customers because they fear the customers will go somewhere else.
5. Those responsible for processing the information believe it will go unannounced during the service.  
The connection card should have a dedicated time (30–60 seconds) in the service. It is vital that whoever is on stage at that time stops talking. If it's not worth 60 seconds, then you don't care.

Hospitality is hard to measure. We can't say, "We had a 23% improvement in hospitality." Capturing information, however, is easy to measure. Most churches count people. If you compare the number of cards you get to head count, you'll begin to understand how effective your information gathering efforts are. Large churches can get a 75%–80% rate of return on connection cards.

- What are three advantages of collecting data from every person in attendance?
- What are the obstacles or hurdles you must address before initiating a process to collect data from each person in attendance? Are those obstacles real or perceived?
- What information do you need on your connection cards?



# FOLLOW-UP

---

This is the administrative part of the project. Let's be honest. This task doesn't require a lot of creativity week after week. However, it is important to evaluate information regularly and update as needed.

This part is following up and following through. Every card will be processed.

In the process queue, each card is handled according to the boxes marked. There is a follow-up process attached to each box. Don't ask for information to which you cannot respond. For instance, don't ask people to list their prayer concerns or needs if you don't have a ministry in place to handle those requests.

Some cards will be returned with more than one box marked. They may be a first-time visitor, have a prayer request, and be interested in baptism. In that case, process all the requests on the card, even if that means handling the card several times.

Best Practical Principles:

1. Follow-up should include timely email-based communication and physical mail to both first- and second-time visitors. This ensures your church is communicating in the visitor's desired medium, even though you don't know them well yet.
2. Commit to a long-term, sustainable process. You want to implement something people are committed to and will make better over time. Long-term is at least six months to a year to see real results, so don't give up!
3. Church is an example-based industry. Church Community Builder wants to change that and move toward a focus on best practices and metrics. What are the fundamental measures that tell your people they're doing a good job? People want to know they are making a difference and accomplishing their objectives. If you can't measure effectiveness, you can't reward participation.

Effective follow-up will help your members and visitors experience one-on-one ministry. Follow-up is based on these facts:

- You care more about people than anything else. People are more important than their money, their attendance, or their history.

- You need accurate and reliable information to demonstrate you care. "They will know us by our love." Love is a verb that requires action, starting with thanking them for visiting you and inviting them back to experience community and the love of God. Salvation and discipleship begin with attendance.
- Good follow-up can make the difference in your visitors wanting to return. They may have questions needing answers before they return. You need to know you did everything in your power to honor their visit and invite them back.

Be creative in using the information to celebrate significant milestones in participation. Why not take the 'gold star' method from elementary school for perfect attendance and apply it to church? If they attended 40 out of 52 Sundays this past year, why not celebrate their dedication with a dinner with the pastor? We track and respond to givers (new givers, consistent givers, large givers), but attendance is more likely to impact their eternity than giving.

From a church perspective, if you track attendance with a connection card, you'll notice patterns and modify programming to fit what you're learning. Assimilation helps connect the pastor to individuals when it's time for pastoral ministry to take place, through the use of dates, milestones, and prayer requests. You can help people understand the value of the information you collect by telling stories that point out the ministry that happens as a result of the data collection process. This is an intentional step that will result in larger buy-in from the congregation.

Preparation for good visitor follow-up includes training the people involved and setting up the processes within Church Community Builder. The teams should be trained with clear expectations for what, when, and how. The significant setup for the follow-up process is designing the Church Community Builder Process Queues to accommodate your intended steps. This means creating the process and queues, assigning managers, and setting up the desired automation.

- Are you equipped to effectively follow up with people who return connection cards?
- Is your church structured to address the needs revealed through the connection cards? What changes do you need to make?



# CONNECTION

---

They showed up once, they got the postcard, but are they really connecting through participating and serving? Many churches confuse connecting with attending. They believe getting more people in the building is all they need to do. They don't have processes that move people into deeper relationships with God's family and the church's mission. Churches that fail to connect people are weakening the foundation on which they are built.

Connecting hooks people into having meaningful relationships with other like-minded people. Church leaders should be helping people develop meaningful relationships with those who share similar values and purpose. It's not enough to simply send people to a class; they need to know their purpose and be connected in ways that enable them to utilize their gifts.

This step is the end of assimilation and the beginning of discipleship. There should be a smooth handoff to someone who can guide them deeper in their relationship with God. The discipleship ministry of the church will only be as strong as the assimilation process. If you aren't assimilating people, you will be increasing the number of spectators rather than improving the strength of the Body of Christ.

People who are assimilated well are more likely to become members, givers, servers, and volunteers. They will support the mission of the church and will more effectively represent God in their everyday lives. They will blur the lines between their religious lives and their personal lives by allowing God's truth to infiltrate everything they do.

People often connect to church when they develop meaningful relationships and are trusted with an area of responsibility. Developing the 'connect' process is a response to what people have experienced at your church through the first and second visits. Help them connect at a deeper level in your church and create opportunities for responsibility and ownership.

Ideas on how someone can be connected to your church can come through a variety of means. Connection can come through a serving opportunity, a small group, a special event, or an invitation to be a part of a fun experience. By helping someone connect, you close the back door and create opportunities for people to be known.

There are as many different ways to connect with the church as there are members of God's Kingdom. Let's highlight four common ways in which you can allow your guests and regular attenders to truly connect. The first two, Newcomer Receptions and Special Events, are easy methods for encouraging newer guests to gather and learn more about your church and its members. The next two, Small Groups and Service Opportunities, are useful



methods for encouraging those who are more comfortable in your church to engage with God and each other on a deeper level.

## Newcomer Receptions

Host ‘meet-and-greet’ events for newcomers to come and learn more about your church and pastors among other guests in a safe, low-risk environment. Hold these events at least quarterly, but announce them regularly in your bulletins or during announcements on Sunday morning.

## Special Events

Along with your regular newcomer receptions, try hosting special events—Christmas services, Harvest Festivals, Easter events, or youth events in the summer. Big, informal events are a great way to open your church up to your local community as well as to more casual attenders looking to connect beyond Sunday's services. These events also provide an excellent opportunity for other members and attenders to serve.

## Small Groups

At larger churches, it's vital to encourage people to connect with a smaller, close-knit group of believers. It's easy to get lost in the shuffle at church, so encourage your members and attenders to start, lead, or join a small group in their area. Groups can be based on the weekly sermons from the Sunday morning worship service, or they can revolve around preset curricula or Bible study topics.

## Service Opportunities

Provide an avenue for your church body to offer their talents, passions, and abilities in service to God's work in the life of the church and its attenders. These opportunities don't have to be special events. They can include things like volunteering to greet guests on Sunday morning, working as an usher, teaching a Sunday school class, volunteering in the nursery, or working at the church's bookstore or coffee shop.

Be sure to provide clear instruction on how to get involved and who to contact, and list some of those opportunities on your weekly connection card to remind people of the various ways in which they can serve.

- What percentage of people at your church attend but are never connected?
- Why do people not see the need to connect with your church?



# CONCLUSION

---

## Healthy Churches Maximize the Assimilation Process

As church leaders, we are responsible for making our effort count. More importantly, we're responsible for the people who come through our doors. Even a small church must have a process that creates a fully functioning system to ensure no one gets lost, left out, or overlooked.

The assimilation engine powers the remainder of your church. The more powerful the assimilation process, the more powerful your church will be. If you perceive a glaring weakness in your church, it is likely because of a weakness in the assimilation process.

Be careful not to let the data become more significant than the people it represents. Too many church leaders focus their energies on the analysis of data while the ministry of the church goes undone. Church Community Builder can help you connect real data to real people and uncover ministry opportunities you might otherwise miss.

While the principles of assimilation apply to any size church, the systems and processes that effectively grow a small church no longer work as well for a medium or large church. With a church of 50 people, we invite our friends and neighbors. We introduce them to our church friends over coffee after the service and they feel welcome and known. They had such a good time, they come back a couple of weeks later and are hooked by good friends, good music, and good teaching.

Starting with a church of just a few hundred, people show up and we don't always know how they got there. And for churches in the thousands, without good process, well... Good luck!

Word of mouth, radio, drive-by, friend of a friend...all are ways the visitor hears of a church and shows up 'uninvited'. When a guest arrives, it is critical to have a disciplined, reliable process that can be measured, monitored, and modified along the way to ensure a first-time visit has the potential to become a long-term relationship. It is critical to care for every visitor just as we would a guest in our home.

Assimilation doesn't create growth. Rather, it is an engine that will multiply it in a sustainable way.

SOFTWARE

COACHING

TRIBES



CHURCH COMMUNITY BUILDER



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**DAVE BAIR** is a member of the Leadership Team at *Church Community Builder* with a focus on Church Coaching and internal systems and processes. He has many years of experience with large process and culture improvement projects in several industries such as manufacturing, oil refining, power generation, universities, and churches. Dave is married to Jessica and they have two great kids, all living in Colorado Springs, CO.



**STEVE CATON** has an extensive background in technology, fundraising, and church leadership. In addition to serving as an elder in his local church, Steve has served in key leadership roles with organizations that help churches and ministries foster greater constituent engagement and retention. As a member of the leadership team at *Church Community Builder*, Steve leverages his unique experience to help local churches strengthen the systems and processes which support life transformation and growth. He is also the primary contributing author on the popular blog *Church Community Matters*. While software is what he does, impacting and influencing the local church is what really matters to him... as well as enjoying Colorado powder with his wife and two sons! *Follow Steve on Twitter.*



© 2013 Church Community Builder, Inc

[facebook.com](#)  
[twitter.com](#)  
[vimeo.com](#)

ccchurch