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The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance: Theological and Case Study Research from Australia

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abstract

Church attendance, as a percentage of population, is declining in Australia. However, the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has identified a number of churches that have large percentages of what the NCLS calls “newcomers” — those who have joined their church in the previous five years and had not previously attended a church. This article reports on theological and sociological case study research into newcomers, the process of engagement, and the churches with which they engage. A model of church engagement in the first century churches is identified and its effectiveness in twenty-first century Australia confirmed.

introduction

Church attendance, as a percentage of population, is declining in Australia.¹ However, the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS), which in 2006 involved 300,000 participants from 7000 churches and nineteen denominations, has

¹ Phillip J. Hughes, “Are Australians ‘Losing Their Religion?’” *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association* 20, no. 2 (2010): 1–6.

identified a number of churches that are growing. Some of these churches have large percentages of what the NCLS calls “newcomers”—those who have joined their church in the previous five years and had not previously attended a church.² These churches are not only benefitting from a “circulation of the saints,”³ but they are also growing by drawing people who previously had no such engagement into church life. These people are often referred to as converts.

As part of his PhD, the researcher sought to gain a better theological and sociological understanding of newcomers, the process of engagement, and the churches with which they engage. To do so, a case study of three churches with high levels of newcomers was undertaken. First a theological basis for newcomer engagement was developed.

theological perspectives

The word “newcomer” does not appear in the Bible. In fact, although the Bible says much about conversion,⁴ it says little about the process whereby a person enters church life. However, two New Testament concepts help provide a framework for a model of newcomer church engagement. The two concepts are “church as family” and “invitation.”

109

church as family

While correct intellectual belief was the major concern of the Greeks, the early Christians were more concerned with transformation. The first evangelists did not simply ask people what they believed about Jesus; they called upon their listeners to forsake all and to follow Him. To embrace Christianity meant a radical change not only in outlook but also in posture, not only in mind but also in heart, not only in worldview but also in behavior, not only in thoughts but also in actions.⁵ This faith of the first Gentile Christians had clear social results. They became well known as a caring, sharing, and open community that was especially sensitive to the poor and the outcasts.

In light of this strong community, it is not surprising that the family or household of God is the most common metaphor for the church in the New Testament.⁶ Although Paul only used the term “household” rarely, so many other

² Sam Sterland et al., “Attracting and Integrating Newcomers into Church Life: Research in Four Countries,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 27, no. 1 (2006).

³ Robin D Perrin, Paul Kennedy, and Donald E Miller, “Examining the Sources of Conservative Church Growth: Where Are the New Evangelical Movements Getting Their Numbers?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 1 (1997).

⁴ For a discussion see Ronald D Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

⁵ Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith Is Always Personal but Never Private*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005), 4.

⁶ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 53.

Hussey: The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance: Theological and related expressions are present that “family” must be regarded as the most significant metaphor of the church.

The concept was probably introduced by Jesus himself in Mark 3:34–35. “Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”

“Brother” or “brethren” is the most common word for Christians in the letters of the New Testament, and Jesus is described as an older brother (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:10–18). Paul instructed the members of a church community to greet one another with a holy kiss (1 Thess 5:26, 1 Cor 16:20). Like all families, the early church communities shared meals together. The word used in 1 Corinthians 11 to describe the meal shared by the Corinthian church, *deipnon*, identified not a token meal (as it has become since) or part of a meal, but an entire, ordinary meal. The term indicates that it was the main (normally evening) meal—the one to which guests were invited. Its character as an ordinary meal was retained even though it had been given new significance.

Thus, the Pauline picture of the church is not as a royal court or as infants or slaves meeting with their parents or masters but as a meeting of adult children with their father.⁷ The use of these family terms is not purely theological but relational. Christians not only refer to one another as brothers and sisters because that is their status, but also because that is how they experience them.

This family-like community is a powerful witness to the faith. Indeed, as Newbigin points out, the preaching of the church carries no weight if it does not come from a community in which the truth of what is being preached is validated in the life of the community.⁸ Evangelism is not just the verbal proclamation of certain propositions but the tangible expression of those propositions in the life of the one who proclaims it. More specifically, the proclamation of the gospel is evident in the relationships of those who belong to the kingdom as expressed by those relationships demonstrated in the life of the church and to those outside the church. As Gibbs and Bolger suggest, a community committed to the gospel of the reign of God provides a most convincing apologetic of the gospel.⁹

Twenty-first century non-believers, as did their first century counterparts, struggle to understand the truths of Christianity just as an outside observer. One first needs to experience the embodied truth of the community. To do so, outsiders

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, “Evangelism in the Context of Secularisation,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (London: SPCK, 2006), 15.

need to be invited to experience the family-like community of churches before they engage with them.

invitation

Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a banquet to which people are invited. In Matthew 22 He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.” The words translated as “who had been invited” and “to tell them to come” were related to the same Greek word *kalleo*, meaning to call or invite.

Paul used the verb *kalleo* more than any other word when referring to conversion.¹⁰ For example, “And those he predestined, he also called (*ekallesen*); those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom 8:30). Not surprisingly, the word translated “church,” *ekklasia*, was also derived from the word *kalleo*.

111

Hence, calling or inviting is a crucial church function. The New Testament indicates that the early believers invited outsiders to experience their faith community in two specific contexts—hospitality and corporate worship.

Hospitality was a particular distinctive of early Christians and Christian communities,¹¹ following the example of Jesus. A study of Luke’s gospel reveals the importance of meals in Jesus’ ministry.¹² Jesus always entered the banquet as one who needed hospitality, but as the banquet proceeded, the role of guest and host, stranger and known, were reversed. The meals recorded in Luke became places of repentance (5:27–39), reconciliation (7:36–50), and mission. Many of His most memorable parables were told during these meals, and the themes of abundance and hospitality characterized these mealtime parables.

Therefore, “Open your homes to strangers,” said Paul in describing the Christian lifestyle (Rom 12:13). Bishops, elders, and widows were required to show hospitality (1 Tim 3:2; 5:9–10; Tit 1:8). Although initially reluctant, the apostle Peter left behind his religious upbringing to eat with Gentiles because he realized God’s hospitality embraced all (Acts 10: 9–11: 18). Peter considered hospitality the right and normal thing for Christians to do: “Open your homes to each other without complaining” (1 Pet 4:9).

Thus, the unchurched were invited to experience the hospitality of the Christian family. They were also invited to the corporate worship experience. For Paul, worship pervaded the whole of life, not just the assembly of a church. This is

¹⁰ Stephen J. Chester, *Conversion at Corinth* (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

¹¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 2nd ed. (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway Communications, 2003), 318.

¹² Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger* (Minneapolis, MW: Fortress Press, 1992).

Hussey: The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance: Theological and

because, for Paul, worship was obedience rather than literal sacrifice (Rom 12:1–2). Since all places and times are the venue of worship, Paul could not speak of Christians assembling in church distinctively for that purpose. They were already worshipping God, acceptably or unacceptably, in whatever they were doing.¹³

However, throughout the Bible, public worship and evangelism are linked. God commanded Israel to invite the nations to join in declaring His glory. Zion is to be the center of world-winning worship (Isa 2:2–4; 56:6–8). Psalm 105 is a direct command to engage in “evangelistic” worship. The Psalmist challenges the assembly to “make known among the nations what he has done” (Ps 105:1) by their voices: “Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of his wonderful acts” (Ps 105:2). God is to be praised before all the nations, as He is praised by His people. The nations are summoned and called to join in the song.

Two important passages relating to public worship and evangelism are found in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 14:24–25, Paul addressed the misuse of the gift of tongues. He indicated that speaking in tongues would cause “unbelievers” to say believers were out of their minds. He insisted that the worship service must be comprehensible to them. He said that if an unbeliever came in, and worship was being done “for the strengthening of the church,” “he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all.” The result: “So falling on his face, he will worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you.’”

In Acts 2, when the Spirit falls on those in the Upper Room, a crowd gathers because they are hearing the disciples praising God and also because this worship is “in our own tongues” (Acts 2:11). As a result, they are first made interested, and later they are convicted deeply. “They were cut to the heart and said, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37) Obvious differences exist between the two situations. However, these passages demonstrate that the early churches, reflecting the Old Testament precedent, encouraged and expected non-believers to be present in corporate worship and that the product of their presence would be conversion.

Corporate worship should focus on the primary purpose of glorifying God and experiencing His transforming presence. It should be a centrifugal experience that thrusts the people of God into the world rather than just a centripetal model that asks the people of God to come to church.¹⁴ Corporate worship should not focus on the worshippers, whether they are seekers or not, but on the One being worshipped.

¹³ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 92.

¹⁴ Mortimer Arias, “Centripetal Mission, or Evangelisation by Hospitality,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. P. W. Chilcote and L. C. Warner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 429.

However, worshippers need to be aware that their worship of God also affirms or contradicts their message about God.¹⁵ Unbelievers will draw lasting conclusions about the veracity and uniqueness of God based on what they see, or do not see, happening in corporate church worship. Visitors are often looking for something supernatural and life changing and a sense of God's presence and work. They experience it in two ways: first, as they hear the truth about God (through worship songs, prayer, communion, baptism, Scripture, testimonies, drama, and so on); and second—and more importantly—as they observe the real relationship between worshippers and God. Unbelievers, influenced by an experience-oriented culture, will see Christians in authentic worship and hunger after that kind of relationship. Therefore, one of the primary and irreplaceable ingredients in evangelism is the quality of corporate worship in the Christian community.

Public worship is the first and central form of witness to the world. It is at the same time a demonstration of the reality of God that cannot be, in every way, understandable and accessible. The watching world must see a community of people who love the God they are addressing, who love each other, and who desire to carry their God's love into the world. The watching world will not necessarily understand the significance of broken bread, poured out wine, or baptismal washing. They will not know what is happening when people pray, communicating with our unseen God whose presence we do not doubt. Even as they do not understand, however, they will witness the difference that the presence of God makes in the midst of this community. They will see good news happening, whether they can join in worship of the one true God or not.¹⁶

Thus, from the theological perspective, the following is a possible process of newcomer engagement: when the body of Christ assembles, the powerful, family-like relationships, the brotherly kiss, the sharing of possessions and meals, and the corporate worship of God are the tangible witness to the invisible reality of the kingdom of God. When individual Christians have invited unbelievers to share hospitality, they have exposed them to the values of the kingdom. As these newcomers have experienced the power of these values first hand and heard the verbal proclamation of the gospel (repent and believe), they have, in turn, decided to enter the kingdom of God and engage with their church.

Having established a theological framework, an investigation of three churches with high levels of newcomer engagement was undertaken.

¹⁵ Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 9.

¹⁶ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 157.

Hussey: The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance: Theological and case study

The cases for this research included three churches with relatively high percentages of newcomers (people who had attended the church for less than five years and had never attended a church before). The NCLS wrote to the fifty churches in Australia with the highest percentages of newcomers in the 2006 survey, requesting them to be involved in this research. Eight churches responded to the request, and three were chosen on the basis of their geographical, demographic, and denominational diversity. The three churches studied each had over thirty percent newcomers and were either moderately or well above average in terms of the NCLS Core Qualities which contribute to the vitality of church life. Each had also grown significantly in the period before and after the 2006 survey. The churches, studied during 2009, include:

- A Salvation Army church in regional Victoria composed of about 120 adults;
- An Anglican (Episcopal) church in the western suburbs of Sydney composed of about 500 adults;
- A Pentecostal church on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland composed of about 500 adults.

These churches represented three quite distinct demographics. The Salvation Army church was in a depressed rural region with much social dislocation. In contrast, the Anglican church was in an upper middle-class area where there was a high percentage of nuclear families. The Pentecostal church was in an area dominated by nuclear families and retirees. The fact that all three churches were evangelical is acknowledged. However, no churches of non-evangelical traditions responded or satisfied the growth criteria. Nevertheless, the theological, demographic, and geographic diversity of the cases should also be noted.

The researcher visited each church over a weekend, interviewed the leaders, held three focus groups (a newcomers group, a group of lay leaders, and a group of “average” congregants), used a questionnaire, and generally observed what was happening in order to better understand the engagement of newcomers in church attendance.

findings about newcomers

As suggested by the New Testament use of *kalleo* and previous sociological research, the process of engagement into the life of a church often involved

personal invitation from a friend or relative.¹⁷ What was interesting, though, was the role of children in the engagement of adults in church attendance. In several cases the newcomer's first contact with the church was through ministry to their children. It was as the *children* invited their parents to come to church that the newcomers began to be engaged. Ministry to children not only expresses acceptance of children, but it also is a useful tool to foster church engagement amongst their parents.

Church engagement for newcomers was, however, also a supernatural experience. This should not be surprising. Sociologists have identified that in the post modern era, Australians are open to experiences which are not necessarily rational.¹⁸ Newcomers expressed an awareness of the guidance of God in their engagement process. This supernatural awareness extended into their perceptions of the preaching. Although they were not seeking any particular theological emphasis or doctrine, their experience of the authoritative and relevant preaching was interpreted by the newcomers as the voice of God speaking directly to them.

115

One of the key reasons that the newcomers hesitated about coming to church was they felt scared of what type of reception they would face. The fact that they were actually made to feel welcome through a non-judgmental acceptance, friendliness and equality was crucial in their decision to engage. Many secular Australians perceive church to be boring or irrelevant,¹⁹ but a big barrier for some newcomers is fear of being judged or rejected.

Hospitality was also an important factor in the successful engagement of the newcomers. Reflecting the New Testament use of hospitality in evangelism, the newcomers were drawn into the family of the church through sharing meals together. The common meal powerfully expresses acceptance, value, and warmth to newcomers and influences their decision to engage.

Previous research has indicated that engagement in church life is usually followed by conversion, rather than conversion leading to church attendance.²⁰ This was confirmed in this research. As the newcomer experienced the family-like community with all its benefits, he or she decided to embrace both the community and its gospel message. However, full engagement in these churches involved a public declaration of conversion in whatever form appropriate for the particular

¹⁷ John Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2006), 52.

¹⁸ Garry Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ John Bellamy et al., *Why People Don't Go to Church* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2002), 14.

²⁰ Bruce Hunsberger, "Swimming against the Current: Exceptional Cases of Apostates and Converts.," in *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*, ed. Leslie J Francis and Yaacov J Katz (Leominster, England: Gracewing, 2000).

Hussey: The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance: Theological and church's tradition (e.g., altar call, baptism, etc). Only after conversion were the symbols of membership given to the newcomer and full membership granted.

As suggested by earlier research,²¹ another factor in the successful engagement of the newcomers was their early involvement in church ministry. This involvement expressed acceptance and conveyed a sense of competence and value to the newcomer which built an early and strong sense of belonging. It also generated commitment through investment in the organization and relationships.

Finally, the leader of the church played an important part in the process of engagement for most newcomers. The particular aspect of the leadership that was important to the newcomer was the leader's "realness" or authenticity. Newcomers look for leaders who are credible and, to some extent, like them. This authenticity is expressed through activities such as the sharing of personal weaknesses and humor. The informality and "humanness" of the leaders symbolized to the newcomer the character of the whole church and prompted further engagement.

116

findings about sense of belonging in churches

The NCLS have identified that a crucial quality of churches that are very good at attracting and retaining newcomers is a strong and growing sense of belonging.²² This sense of belonging is crucial not just for engaging newcomers but also in enhancing the general quality of church life.

It was found that a strong and growing sense of belonging in these churches did not come by attachment to buildings or length of tenure but from the experience of being accepted and welcomed by a loving family. Although some participants used the term "belonging" to describe their experience of church life, they were more likely to describe it in terms of being part of a family. The statement in the questionnaire, "I feel at home in this church," was strongly agreed with in all three churches.

The language of "home" and "family" echoes the most common biblical metaphor for church. Just as a family is a place where you feel like you belong because of its clear boundaries, hospitality, and strong relational ties, a church where the congregants and newcomers feel a strong and growing sense of belonging is merely fulfilling the New Testament model for church life.

The church at its best reflects all that is noblest and most worthwhile in human family life: attitudes of caring and mutual regard; understanding of needs,

²¹ Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, and Sandra Moore, *Mission under the Microscope: Keys to Effective and Sustainable Mission* (Adelaide: Openbook, 1995), 108.

²² Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 52.

whether physical or spiritual; and above all the “sense of belonging” to a social unit in which we find acceptance without pretence or make-believe.²³

These churches were “open” families and homes. Many churches would argue that they are a friendly family. Some even use the word “family” in their title. However, it is only a very small percentage of churches which are able to express family strongly enough to attract and hold high percentages of newcomers. The reality is that many churches are friendly, but friendship only exists between the existing members. Little, if any, “friendship capacity” is left to embrace newcomers.²⁴ In contrast, these high percentage newcomer churches were genuinely an open family, not only for themselves, but also for newcomers.

However, these high percentage newcomer churches were also “tight” families. They had strong sibling and filial bonds fostered by a sense of common purpose, fierce loyalty to the heads of the family (the clergy), and a powerful set of common rituals which bound them together. All three churches also had very clear boundaries which gave a shared understanding of who was “in” and who is “out” of membership. These boundaries were made more defined by the strictness²⁵ of the church. Members were expected to be highly committed, to undergo training, to abstain from certain practices, and make a large contribution to the church in time and/or money. Entrance into membership was only in the manner prescribed by the church—a costly and public process. This made these churches more effective by deterring “free riders” who were not fully committed to it but who would still consume church resources.²⁶ These strong boundaries also gave a very strong sense of identity and membership, and hence belonging, to these churches.

117

On a superficial level, these high expectations may seem costly and a deterrent from involvement. Because they were performed in the company of brothers and sisters and because newcomers saw how they contributed to the fulfillment of the church vision, these tasks actually gave them value and a sense of belonging. Newcomers were quickly given tasks to do, and they enjoyed doing them. It confirmed they were part of the family, not just a visitor.

Another source of a sense of belonging was the activities that went on during the week. These high percentage newcomer churches built a sense of family and belonging through structures that gave congregants a strong sense of connection and relation. Organized and promoted home groups, ministry teams, hospitality, training events, and other informal social gatherings meant that people had a real

²³ Ralph P. Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1979), 124.

²⁴ Daniel V. A. Olson, “Church Friendships: Boon or Barrier to Church Growth?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989): 432–47.

²⁵ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

²⁶ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–211.

Hussey: The Engagement of Newcomers in Church Attendance: Theological and opportunity to get to know one another in meaningful ways and to build belonging.

Egalitarianism and informality were also a key factor in building a sense of belonging in these churches. Their egalitarian nature gave the congregants a strong sense of influence in their church, even though they did not have direct (democratic) control over it. The result was that there was no awareness of “us and them,” only “us.” When people perceive themselves to have an equal value and an equal part to play in the life of an organization, their sense of belonging is enhanced. Leaders who create the impression that they take the ideas of the followers into account, thus confirming their value and equality, build a sense of belonging.

Training was also an important feature of these churches. Each had a formal and well-promoted series of training events which equipped congregants to learn new skills. The training allowed the congregants to feel empowered to make a meaningful, and valued, contribution to the church. This costly investment, as well as providing the church with ample resources, built belonging.

118

conclusions

An examination of the New Testament suggests that an invitation to experience the hospitality and corporate worship of the early churches was crucial to creating an effective context for the verbal proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers. As newcomers experienced the kingdom values in the family-like community of a church, the verbal message became tangible and attractive.

This research confirms that this model remains effective. It also highlights the relationship between a sense of family in churches and what sociologists call a sense of belonging and suggests how this crucial sense of belonging is fostered. Expressions of acceptance through non-judgment, value through equality, invitation to involvement, and empowerment through training, are crucial to a sense of belonging and engagement of newcomers. Such expressions ease the concerns and fears of potential newcomers as they engage with a church and its message.

However, the boundaries to full membership remain strong. The pathways into membership are clearly and frequently outlined through the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Newcomers often expect engagement to be a supernatural process, and churches should not downplay the radical transformation or costs engagement entails. An inviting, hospitable, egalitarian, and worshipping church family with

strong boundaries continues to be the type of church that newcomers find attracting and engaging.

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