

NURTURING AND CARING NEW MEMBERS

I. Rationale:

My conviction is that the task of nurturing and caring new members should be a team-work effort. Unless all members of the congregation accept the responsibility they have for new members, the ministry of nurturing and caring for new members will be shallow and bear very little fruit. All members of the congregation should involve in this ministry at a certain degree. But this does not mean that everyone can do whatever they can to support new members. This kind of “involvement” will certainly create big chaos, and sometimes it is worse than no involvement at all. On the other hand, there is another danger, that is, when a task is everybody’s, it’s very frequently becomes nobody’s.

II. Imperatives:

For those reasons, I am convinced that a congregation that is serious about nurturing and caring new members should commit itself to two imperatives:

- An awareness of the importance of this ministry should be raised among all church members through preaching, teaching, training, etc.
- There should be an organization of all church members with their good intention into several levels of nurturing and caring

III. Four levels of nurturing and caring

- Discipleship
- Mentoring
- Visitation
- Fellowship

As I mentioned earlier, all church members should be encouraged to involve in this ministry at different levels, according to their gifts and conditions. There will always be some people who are quite able to undertake the task of a teacher (for discipleship) or a mentor. Some others are ready to be part of the visitation ministry. And together, all church members can create a nurturing environment through various forms of fellowship or the like.

1. Discipleship:

The pastor or a trusted and experienced teacher should undertake the task of indoctrinating the new members. This can begin with basic lessons of the Christian faith (The Trinity, Man, Sin, Salvation, etc.). Some denominations make this a required course before baptism. The next level should be a series of advanced lessons of the faith. For example, new members may be guided through a course which offers a series of more in-depth lessons, something like “Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study.” This may include a series of lessons focusing on discipleship drawn from Old Testament and New Testament.

2. Mentoring

Each new member should be assigned a mentor right at the beginning of his/her faith journey. This mentor could be (but not always) the same teacher who is responsible for indoctrinating the new member. This kind of mentorship is more

like a friendship that it is a teacher/student relationship. This will help the new members overcome the fear in the beginning period. Take the lowest level of this fear as an example, many things that seem common and normal to church members are in fact very “scary” to new members. “Where to sit?” “Where is this hymn in the hymnbook?” “Where is this passage in the Bible?” and a host of similar concerns and questions often worry new members. This fear can be overcome easily with the help of a friend—a mentor—in the congregation.

But mentoring is much more than providing guidance for new members with respect to new “church things” at the beginning. It is more about providing example in the Christian faith and initiating new members to all aspects of church life.

3. Visitation

Visitation is much needed at the beginning stage. This can be done by the pastor/pastors, the mentor, and visitation team.

Willing lay members should be trained and formed into visitation team(s). While pastoral or mentoring visitation is much needed, this kind of team visitation will create a sense of closeness between new members and other brothers and sisters in the church.

4. Fellowship

This is where all other church members, those who do not belong to the group of the mentor and visitation team, should appear in the picture. The idea is to create a safe and friendly environment for the confidence of the new members to grow. There are several groups and activities in the church having great potential for this purpose

IV. Training

It is obvious that while concern about new members should be the responsibility of all church members (as part of their calling to be a Christian), not every church members if gifted with the skills and attitudes necessary to carry out such a ministry. Therefore, the congregation should identify those individuals in their midst who are particularly gifted for this work.

The constitutions of many congregations list the ministry to new members as one of the duties of the board of evangelism or the caring committee or some other groups. There are many good reasons to continue to identify the ministry to new members as the responsibility of the board(s) or committee(s) or equivalent group(s). However, it must also be recognized that just because the individuals are elected to serve on such board(s) or committee(s) or assigned to those group(s) does not mean that they have the gifts of faith, temperament, ability to listen, etc., that are helpful, and even prerequisite, characteristics of “successful” mentor(s) and visitors. A careless comment may turn off the new member’s trust and confidence, and in worse cases may push away this person.

For that reason, there are two important issues that need to be considered seriously. First, it is imperative that the leaders of the congregation give careful thought to those who should be responsible for mentoring and making the visits on new members. Second, those who are recommended to serve as mentor(s) or members of visitation team(s) should go through a vigorous training program.

With regard to recruiting individuals for mentoring and visitation, in general it can be said that the five most important characteristics for these volunteers to possess are: (1) love for brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ; (2) nonjudgmental attitude, (3) patience, (4) ability to listen empathetically, and (5) commitment to the Great Commission given by the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to these qualities, the congregation should entrust the mentoring ministry only to those who have a deep knowledge of the Word of God.

As for a possible training program, I suggest that the congregation should design a plan to train those lay members who are called and recruited to the ministry of mentoring and visitation to new members. In the following, I would like to present the summary of a possible plan for that purpose, but each congregation should build a plan that fits into its own context and must reflect its own condition and resources.

A Suggested Plan to Train Lay Mentor and Visitors

Session 1: Understanding Yourself and the Mission

Helping participants explore their own feelings about the congregation, the ministry to new members. They will also have the opportunity to express any fears or apprehensions they may have concerning the building of a close relationship with new members. They need to work together as a team (or in pair), honestly addressing and discussing the issue, and then helping each other come up with a personal strategy in dealing with those fears and apprehensions

Session 2: Understanding the Significance of the Mission through Bible Study

Luke 15 is a very good chapter that can be chosen as the scriptural foundation for this session. At the conclusion of this session, the participants should be able to: (1) interpret the three parables of Jesus in this passage; (2) list specific applications of the parables to the life on the congregation with regard to the need of nurturing and caring new members, who are just back from “the far country”; (3) list ways in which the power of the Gospel message may be applied to help new members develop characteristics that are more in conformity to the will of God; (4) begin to formulate a strategy for approaching new members which takes seriously the love and acceptance of God, who is both compassionate and holy

Session 3: The Art of Listening

Addressing the need of listening and the challenges in a “real conversation.” At the conclusion of this session, the participants should be able to: (1) list behaviors which help people listen to others; (2) discuss the effects that listeners’ attitudes have on their listening behaviors; (3) identify personal attitudes towards new members that have changed or in the process of changing; (4) suggest ways of dealing with feelings of

inadequacy when making calls on new members; and (5) recognize specific listening behaviors when they are evidenced.

Session 4: Principles of Effective Listening

At the conclusion of this session, the participants should be able to: (1) repeat key concepts concerning principles of effective listening that were discussed and shared in session 3; (2) provide answers to questions which seek to encourage participants to develop helpful responses to the attitudes, behaviors, questions, and comments of new members; (3) develop skills in differentiating between statements which (a) describe what a person has seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelled, (b) present what a person thinks, believes, or assumes, (c) state what a person feels, (d) express what a person plans of doing, and (e) set forth what a person has done, is doing, or will do.

Session 5: Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the congregation in the ministry of nurturing and caring new members

At the conclusion of this session, the participants should be able to: (1) articulate their own perceptions of the effectiveness of various aspects on congregational life; (2) list those aspects of the congregation's life that seem least strong and positive; (3) prepare responses which may be effective in addressing the concerns of new members who cite specific "weak" areas of congregational life that may cause them to distance themselves from congregational life; (4) propose strategies to alert the members of the elected and/or appointed board/committees of the congregation to the difficulties, inadequacies, etc., identified by the participants that need to be addressed to reduce negative reactions to aspects of congregational life; (5) propose strategies for using the feedback of new members to assist members of the elected and/or appointed board/committees of the congregation to address the fears of new members to aspect of congregational life; (6) outline the plans that the congregation's leaders have already designed and put in place to meet the concerns of new members; and (7) propose a plan for evaluation.