



Assimilating Newcomers into ABFs - May 05

One of the best parts of being in a mid-sized community is the friendships we have. What people tell me about their Adult Bible Fellowship it always makes me smile, "Our ABF is the best!" For so many that is their experience. Their relationships are powerful. It happens as we go through life together. We are bonded together with each good experience and difficult time. Additionally, when we work together on projects, new connections are made with our friends. When things turn sour in our lives or life comes crashing in we seek out these people in our Adult Bible Fellowship. This is good. God made us for each other.

But if we aren't careful we can slowly become an exclusive group that only nurtures our insider relationships. This is a problem because most of our churches have hundreds of people who've yet to experience community. These people come to church and blow out the door as fast as they can.

So, how do we help break ourselves of some potentially bad relational habits and draw in others?

We need to consider how we ASSIMILATE or draw others into community. We need a holistic approach to help our communities welcome those new to our ABFs. We need a strategy to draw people from the pews and into our groups.

Assimilation can be broken into three parts. We like to use the acronym A-W-E: Attract, Welcome and Enfold. Using these three, an ABF continues to be sensitive to newcomers and makes them feel welcome.

Attract is the process of drawing guests into the community. Clearly, we must have good publication of printed materials and every other communication avenue available to the church (pulpit encouragement, announcements, newsletter, banners). Even having a big event highlighting ABFs on a particular Sunday is helpful. However, we cannot forget that the best way to get someone involved in community is through personal invitation. All too often we get lazy and forget to invite others. It seems so much easier to rely on a publication or an announcement.

One of our pastors once said he couldn't believe the amount of personal contacts he had in the hallways when he slowed down and made eye contact. He, all of a sudden had multiple ministry opportunities. He had chances to listen, to show people where to go. Every one of us can do this, too. We need to slow down in the halls and look for opportunities to serve.

Welcome is the way we greet people once they come into our doors. Everyone in the class needs to own the greeting process. If we do it is a wonderful way to come into a new setting for the guest. Most of our ABFs have greeters right at the door. They help initiate the greeting by saying hello, getting them a nametag and asking for some information. After that step our greeters are to find a way to connect the guest with a regular attendee. When the class is on the lookout together with the greeters we can ensure that the first few minutes are comfortable.

Once they are there we encourage our people to keep their circles open. In other words, is there enough room for someone else to join their little group in conversation? I was so embarrassed on time when a group of guys and I were laughing and thoroughly enjoying each other. I happened to look behind me to find this new guy standing alone with his back pushed up against the wall. He looked so uncomfortable, almost panicked. We had blown it. Who knows how long he was standing there! We quickly brought him into our group and introduced ourselves.

The next step in welcoming is to begin a conversation. Ever gotten tongue-tied not knowing what to say? F-O-R-M is a great way to get started. Ask questions about Family. "Tell me about your

family.” Ask about their Occupation. “How do you spend your time?” Inquire about their recreational activities. “What do you like to do for fun?” And finally ask about their Ministry or Mission. You probably won’t need all four because you’ll find things in common to discuss further. People will talk about themselves if we give them safe questions to answer.

Enfold is the final piece to assimilating new friends. Here the goal is to find as many ways to draw them into the fun of being together. Follow up after a visit with a call or a note. Invite them out to the next service project or social. Introduce them to as many people as possible in the class. Invite them out to lunch after church. Use any way you can begin to help them feel a part of the life of the group. One funny way we’ve figured out a newcomer wants to be in the ABF is when they sign the treat list. If they sign up to bring the snack next month, they’re saying they want to be with you.

Attract, Welcome & Enfold. Learn and teach these to the regular attendees of your communities and you’ll be a long way toward building stronger community at your church. Everyone in the church needs to buy into being friendly and drawing others into the fun of the relationships.

- Dane Allphin, Pastor of Adult Ministries at The Chapel in Akron, Ohio