

ABSTRACT

Asimilación: A Study of Costa Rican Newcomers in Their Search for a Church and the Church's Response to Them

This research project examined four case studies of different religious groups in the metropolitan area of San Jose, Costa Rica in order to discover how these religious groups utilize a process of assimilation with newcomers. The four case studies formed the core of this research. These included: two megachurches, one a non-pentecostal megachurch and the other a neo-pentecostal megachurch; a house church; and a Jehovah's Witness congregation. The methodology included participant observation of the religious activities of each group (from four to ten weeks) and structured interviews. During the first weeks of the participant observation, the researcher recruited newcomers as informants for the study. These informants were interviewed by phone after their first and second visits to the church and monthly for months one through five. Two informants per group participated in an exit interview at month six. The study also included interviewing pastors and drop-outs from each church. A six month study period was chosen because this tends to be "the trial period" for newcomers or for new converts to be assimilated, according to Costa Rican researcher, Jorge Gomez, and U.S. researchers Lyle Schaller and Win Arn. This study found, however, that after six months, in most cases, there were no signs that the newcomers were on a track toward being assimilated.

The study sought to discover how churches assimilate newcomers, with a focus on the practices used to provide newcomers with the group's religious culture. Every religious group has a culture which is a social construction that is transmitted, acquired, and reproduced by those who participate in the group. No one congregation is one unified

culture; rather, all congregations include some variety of subcultures, but there may be one dominant subculture above the others. As well, the church has a dual nature as a human institution and the divine body of Christ.

This dissertation utilized the following two main theoretical frameworks: Church Growth and Kingdom Theology. The study proposed that Church Growth is strong in strategies, but weak on theology; and that Kingdom Theology is strong in theology, but weak on strategies. The churches were studied from a missiological perspective of applied social sciences (i.e., Church Growth on assimilating newcomers) and from biblical and theological studies perspectives for understanding the divine nature of the church in including newcomers. It was found that for assimilation/inclusion to take place, both the church and the newcomer must do their part in the process. On the one hand, the church must seek to include the newcomer, and on the other hand, the newcomer must desire to become part of the church. Ideally, assimilation works as a process where a church seeks to transmit its culture, while newcomers seek to acquire that culture.

In regards to the church's role in assimilation/inclusion, this study found that there was no formal process of assimilation/inclusion of newcomers within the evangelical congregations studied. This lack of care for newcomers generates two important issues for a church in Costa Rica: 1) a lack of care for newcomers potentially leads to inactivity and later to nominalism, and (2) when there is no process of assimilation, there is no way to identify receptive groups (people whose God's prevenient grace has prepared to meet Christ). These congregations seemed to be producing and reproducing inactive Christians. For instance, the megachurches studied were growing by recycling inactive middle-class believers.

In regards to the newcomers' role in assimilation/inclusion, among the newcomers in this study, the researcher found people who were unwilling to respond or incapable of being assimilated. The researcher named them "Churched shoppers" because those newcomers visited other churches at least once during the five months of attending the church under study. Thus, their attendance was occasional, and they behaved as religious nomads moving from church to church without making any commitment.

The case study approach in this study can help to generate hypotheses for further studies on churches in Costa Rica, Central America, and Latin America. Thus, the most important hypothesis from this dissertation challenges the assumption, based on optimistic perspectives of the growth of the "Southern" church, which Christian-evangelical churches are growing in Latin America. The history of Costa Rica, and other nations in Latin America, has been of Christian assimilation by force and neocolonial importation of church models. Considering this, it must be asked: What does it mean to be a Christian? Is the church in Latin America growing as fast as the general population growth (by percentage)? What do we mean by the growth of the church (numeric attendance growth, vis-à-vis a multidimensional growth of the church that produces Kingdom growth)? Are Latin American churches realizing the menace of growing numbers of inactive and nominal believers? Our Lord and Savior came preaching the Kingdom, but the church in Latin America seems to have received instead the institutional North Atlantic models for "doing" church.

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that it is the Holy Spirit in me, not Osías. One day in particular, the Lord called me; and many other days thereafter, the Lord keeps reminding me of that calling. One day, a different calling may come, and I will meet Jesús face-to-face. Meanwhile, my life in Christ has not been boring at all! May your Kingdom come

PART I : PROBLEM, METHODOLOGY, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, AND
ASSIMILATION CHALLENGES

Part I presents the background to the problem, the methodology for the research, a literature review, the theoretical framework, and a discussion of assimilation challenges.

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM, METHODOLOGY, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

When I visit churches in Costa Rica and the United States, I often try to see how I am treated as a visitor. The amazing surprise has been how unfriendly most churches are. In some cases, not even the pastor greeted me! In many cases, I filled out the forms for someone interested in the local church and was never contacted or visited by anyone. What if I were a genuine seeker looking for God in the midst of God's community and was never able to find the Divine due to the lack of a human touch in closed communities that do not reach out to visitors?

Upon my return to Costa Rica, after living for ten years in the United States, my wife and I started looking for a home church. We decided to first try the megachurches¹ because of their entertaining worship, and preaching. We discovered that one of the few nonpentecostal megachurches in Costa Rica is *Comunidad Cristiana Vida Abundante* (Abundant Life Christian Community). It was one of the last churches we visited over a decade ago before we moved to the U.S. At that time it was a small church near the home in which I was raised. Now it is a church with an average attendance of four thousand people distributed through four weekend worship services.

We started visiting this church in January (2004), and three months later I decided to attend their orientation meeting for newcomers. It was a two-hour meeting of general information about their organization and doctrine, including a time where the thirty newcomers introduced themselves, and it ended with a period of questions for the senior pastors. I filled out a form with my name and other demographic information and marked

those ministries in which I wished to serve. Since that time, I have still not been contacted by any minister or leader. This church has a wide variety of ministries but does not have a membership system. Instead, they talk about becoming a member of “the family.” They do not have a way to keep track of who visits, who comes regularly, or who is not coming anymore. Worship services have a large attendance, yet I was unable to make friends there. After ten months of attending, I wondered if I was truly a “member of the family.” Actually, I did not know who the members of this family were. I did not feel part of the fellowship of the church and began to consider visiting other churches.

This church experience has led me to ask questions to discover what makes a person come to a church, remain in it, and become an active part of the fellowship, or, on the other hand, what makes them leave. From my personal experience, I can understand the deep and genuine desire of some people to find a community of faith where they may encounter Christ at a personal level. The local church, however, does not always seem concerned with this desire. How many people come and go every Sunday facing the reality of unfriendly churches where nobody cares to greet them personally or ask their name? How many people, like me, are considering not wasting time visiting any more churches that seem not to care for them? In Costa Rica we are facing the disturbing reality that churches are becoming careless and ineffective in welcoming people into their midst.² The narrow front door and the wide back door seem to be an epidemic here.³ What must Costa Rican churches do to be more effective in assimilating new people in their churches so that they are incorporated as an active member of the family of God?⁴

Statement of the Problem

Which practices facilitate the process of religious assimilation/inclusion⁵ of a newcomer into the life of a religious group? The researcher seeks to discover the implicit (i.e. un-planned or hidden) and explicit (planned or intentional) processes (e.g., activities, rituals, training sessions, worship events, retreats, etc.) and content (e.g., myths about the church, biblical and group stories, doctrines, repeated topics during sermons, and other recurrent themes) of assimilation that different religious groups in Costa Rica utilize to include or welcome newcomers as participants in their fellowship. The researcher hopes that the results of this study will be helpful to Costa Rican churches to improve their assimilation and hospitality strategies and thus increase their retention rates.

In order to consider this research question, the following assumptions are made: The process of incorporation of a newcomer into the life of a church or religious group has been called assimilation in the literature on Church Growth. "Assimilation" has been studied by Church Growth experts mostly from the perspective of church membership, assuming that newcomers come to a particular church to join first and then to "belong" (Bast 1988). The focus of this dissertation is on those first six months during which the newcomer considers whether or not remain as visitor or not (Gomez 1996).

Every religious group has a culture (a way of doing, valuing, feeling, and believing about things) that is transmitted to newcomers through stories and by participating in the group's life (Ammerman 1998). Joining a religious community may come before or after participating in it, but acquiring the community's content comes only after some level of participation.

Assimilation includes (a) social assimilation through a relational system such as small groups that help in developing meaningful social ties, and (b) cultural assimilation which involves acquiring symbolic meanings, values and norms, and particularly acquiring the language and narrative of the group (O'Flannery 1961). Thus, by participating in and acquiring the group's culture, the newcomer develops a sense of belonging with the group, or a "we" feeling (Schaller 1988). The group's culture may include the history of the group, its rules, customs, roles, statuses, rituals, myths, beliefs, and values.

This research project used four case studies of different religious groups in the metropolitan area of San Jose, Costa Rica in order to discover how these religious groups utilize a process of assimilation with newcomers. The study focused on how the churches assimilate newcomers, that is, the practices that the churches use to provide newcomers with a religious culture. It discovered the extent to which church communities transmit their religious culture through activities, artifacts, language and story, and whether or not newcomers are able to acquire it as such (Ammerman 1998).

The following hypothesis specifies the scope of this research. Newcomers learn the culture of the new community by participating (social interaction) in the religious group's rituals (activities) and by acquiring the religious group's myth (story) (O'Flannery 1961, Geertz 1966, Ammerman 1997, 1998). Insofar as newcomers learn to reproduce the culture of the new community, they show identification with the community (that "we" feeling) and are more likely to stay in the community (Schaller 1978). If they are not included into the new community or do not learn to reproduce the culture, then they are likely to leave the community.

Developing a group identity in the newcomer is crucial during the assimilation time. That is, if the newcomer identifies with the new group during the first six months of participation, that person is beginning to be socialized (Arn and Arn 1988). On the contrary, if after six months the newcomer does not identify or feel part of the religious group (that “we” feeling, or sense of belonging), it is likely the person will leave the group at any time (Schaller 1978).

The following research questions provided the scope of the statement of the problem. These questions include specific terms that will be defined in the next section.

- What group activities, artifacts, and stories does the church offer that might help incorporate newcomers into the group? How open are the existing groups involved in those activities? How welcoming are they? How easy or difficult is it for the newcomer to get involved? How is that process of inclusion organized, planned, executed, and developed in different activities (educational and/or ritualistic) for newcomers? What are the church’s practices? What is the content of those practices?
- From the newcomer’s point of view and experience, what contributes to the newcomer getting involved or not getting involved in group activities? What contributes to the newcomer learning or not learning the culture of the church?

Delimitations

Considering the implicit limitations of the case study approach, the scope of the problem is delimited in the following ways:

1. The conclusions of this study are not intended to be generalized as representative of other churches in Latin America. The methodology, however, could be replicated in

other geographical areas to study how religious groups use socializing processes, activities, stories, and language to assimilate their newcomers.

2. This study is about researching the early stages of a newcomer joining a religious group. A religious group that consciously practices a process of socialization may provide newcomers with deep religious experiences. People may join a religious community as the embodiment of the divine (e.g., the body of Christ) expecting later to experience the divine itself (e.g., Christ). This study is interested in researching only the first six months of the process of assimilation, including the early stages where the newcomer begins to experience the openness of the new community.
3. This study is not primarily about church desertion, although desertion is the other side of the coin of assimilation. There are many reasons people stop attending a church. Difficulties in acquiring religious culture of a group may be one important factor but not the only one to explain church desertion. This study is based on the assumption that learning the religious culture through participation in the group's life contributes to whether or not newcomers develop a sense of belonging. This study does not claim to be a measure of all the means of social integration. It is a study of how people acquire and use the stories of their new community in religious activities (i.e. Sunday school, religious training, group studies, worship time, week-day services, among others) and outside the religious group (i.e. levels of fellowship, scripture study, and small groups).
4. Thom Rainer proposes the following 13 principles of Church Growth: prayer, leadership of the pastor, empowering the laity, church planting, evangelism, worship, finding the prospects, receptivity, planning for growth, physical facilities, small

- groups, signs and wonders (power encounter), and assimilation (1993, 171-313). All of these principles work together synergistically. While this study will consider most of these principles in some way, it will focus primarily on assimilation as it relates to Church Growth.
5. Finally, the focus of this study is on how newcomers (from their first visit) go through a process of becoming part of the religious groups they have been visiting. This study is not concerned with their conversion process but, rather, focuses on their participation in the life of the community. The researcher wants to understand the process by which they begin to change from being an “outsider” to an “insider” in their new community. This study seeks to discover those processes (activities and content) that may help newcomers identify with the religious group they have visited.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and their interaction are important for this study.

Assimilation/Socialization/Incorporation/Inclusion

Missiology is an interdisciplinary field, and by bringing multiple disciplines into one study, a researcher may face the constant challenge of being misunderstood by using multiple terms as synonyms. In this case the terms of *assimilation*, *incorporation*, *socialization*, and *inclusion*, come from different theoretical perspectives and offer slightly different nuances for understanding the area of study on which this dissertation is focused. The intention of the researcher is to use these terms somewhat interchangeably inasmuch as they may refer to the same phenomenon.

Early Church Growth researchers used the term *assimilation* to describe the process by which new converts became part of a church, while later Church Growth studies used the term *incorporation* to refer to the same process, due to racial and ethnic problems some felt inherent in the term *assimilation*. Sociologists have used the terms *socialization* and *resocialization* to refer to the process by which a person learns how to function within a particular group or subgroup. Kingdom theologians have used the term *inclusion* to refer to the way God may bring a person into the church. Since this study draws upon each of these disciplines, including church growth studies, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and theology, it is necessary to use all of these terms in order to fully understand the process by which God's guests may or may not become part of a church.

The researcher has chosen to use primarily a combined term of *assimilation/inclusion*. The concepts of *socialization*, *resocialization*, and *incorporation*⁶ are discussed further in the theoretical framework as an undergirding to this combined term. The phenomenon of *assimilation* is a two-way process in which all churches participate (whether they know it or not), but it is God who initiates a process of *inclusion*. In theological terms *inclusion* describes God's active participation in the world, as a God who goes and invites those who repent to join Christ's body. Thus, the church is called to participate in that mission (*missio Dei*). In sociological terms, *assimilation* is what the person does to be included in the group, and then, what the group or congregation does to include that person as part of the group. This study focuses on the combination of both of these concepts, *assimilation* and *inclusion*, brought together in creative tension.

Thus, assimilation is both a culturally and a social process. As such, this process involves (1) cultural assimilation (the acquisition of values, memories, sentiments, ideas, and attitudes), and (2) social assimilation (involves the participation in primary groups of reference, participation in the life of such groups to acquire the roles and status, in order to understand the life of those groups) (O'Flannery 1961). Thus, each congregation has its own culture that is transmitted to its members. In order to do this it develops a complex network of symbols and signals that provides newcomers with the specific peculiarities of a cultural and social life. From a perspective of the religious group, being socialized or assimilated is a process of facilitating the newcomer (outsider) into the ongoing life, fellowship, and ministry of the worshiping congregation, until developing a sense of belonging not just to the local church but to the Kingdom as well. From the perspective of the newcomer is about getting involved acquiring the culture, and participating in the group's life.

Considering that this dissertation seeks to study only the first six months⁷ of a newcomer in the life of a new religious group, the operational definition of socialization/assimilation is as follows: A person being socialized or assimilated may begin to acquire the culture and participate in the group's culture (that "we" feeling) even when the newcomer (during the first six months) cannot fully understand it, has not acquired it completely, and/or has not yet aligned his or her personal values with that of the religious group. Assimilation is more of a sensing issue than a thinking issue.⁸

Thus a newcomer is being assimilated when the group and the individual mutually and actively function to facilitate a process when: (1) he or she not only attends regularly the main church services, but also gets involved in participating in other church activities

(e.g., small groups, retreats, trainings, ministry participation); (2) he studies and gets in contact with the specific beliefs of the group (myth), (3) she begins using the words/concepts that people in the group use, (4) he uses the concepts in phrases and sentences that sound like the themes that the church has emphasized, (5) she begins to act like people in the church in terms of practices and participation in rituals, (6) he begins to spend quality time with people from the group, and (7) for outreach purposes she does not break her social networks with non-believer friends. Assimilation is not complete until newcomers get involved in mission. In other words, one learns a culture by participating in it, and once one develops a sense of belonging, one begins to acquire the values, beliefs, and cognitive categories of such culture by practicing those beliefs.

In this study, the term “inclusion” is suggested as an expansion upon the term “assimilation” because “inclusion” is more theological. However, for research purposes the term “assimilation” is more sociological and easier to measure. By bringing inclusion alongside assimilation as a synonym for the same phenomenon, but from a theological perspective, the term assimilation is enriched. Assimilation could be a problematic term because it is used in a neutral sense to mean a person’s incorporation into a group, but in a negative sense to mean the loss of one’s identity (forced or by choice) as one disappears into another society. From a Kingdom theology perspective, inclusion enriches the concept of assimilation making it more theological and linking it to Kingdom hospitality. We include by being hospitable. Thus, it helps us to explain how the church actively seeks to include “outsiders” to become part of the people of God.

The Newcomer

A newcomer is someone who has begun to visit the religious group and is beginning to acquire the culture of the community. It is someone on the threshold between being an “outsider” and not yet a complete “insider.”

Culture

Culture is a social construction that is transmitted, acquired, and reproduced by those who take part in it. “To recognize that a congregation’s way of [doing, believing, valuing, and feeling] are shaped by habits and informal patterns of friendship is to recognize that each congregation has a culture of its own—characteristic ways of acting, speaking, socializing new members, and the like” (Ammerman 1997, 54). Thus, each congregation has a culture. Nancy Ammerman states that a researcher may approach a congregation’s culture by looking at its activities, artifacts, language and story.

Activities

“The culture of the congregation is, first, a pattern of activity. It is what the congregation does. . . . The single most common congregational activity is a weekly worship event” (Ammerman 1997, 54). In worship, churches re-enact sacred stories from which they draw their identity. How people participate in worship by sitting, standing, kneeling, praising, and/or praying are ways to engage the divine by bodily sensuous experiences that enact the faith of the worshipper and create community. Worship creates signals that express what the congregation believes, values, and feels about itself and the world.

Artifacts

“The congregation’s culture is not just the activities in which it engages, but also the props for and residues of those activities. The congregation’s culture involves both a structuring of time and a structuring (and filling) of space” (Ammerman 1997, 59). Like any other culture, congregations invent material objects that aid them in performing their routine tasks and expressing the values they adore. For instance, one artifact for structuring both time and space is the setting (i.e, complex of buildings). The setting communicates a great deal about the patterns of activity and values of the congregation, as well as the assumptions about God, nature, humanity, itself, and others. The setting also includes the landscaping, parking, sanctuary, signs and banners, chairs, electronic devices, musical instruments, and the complex of buildings. Analyzing the arrangement and use of congregational artifacts helps in understanding the group’s identity and its relationship to the world.

Language and Story

The use of language provides a way to organize the congregation’s activities in time and space, and through stories, it transmits the lore of the group.

Cultures are both patterns of activity and patterns of objects, but they are also patterns of speech—what people do together and what they say. Because language is a basic order of reality, we can expect any group that spends time together to develop ways of talking about the experiences its members share. . . . [For instance,] learning the group’s jargon is part of becoming a member. (Ammerman 1997, 60)

Ammerman also reminds us that congregations do not construct their culture out of nothing. They have “stores” from which they borrow their ingredients, like their religious (theological) tradition and the larger social and cultural environment to which

they belong (the rhythm of their music, the order and timing of events, the arrangement of the space, the dress code, etc.). From this social and cultural environment congregations acquire demographic and social structures (occupation, education, ethnicity, and residence). These aspects are important to understand because people bring their social and cultural expectations to church. Here the insight of Donald McGavran that “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers” makes sense (1990, 163). No one congregation is really one unified culture; rather, all congregations include some variety of subcultures, but there may be one dominant subculture above the others. These subcultures organize themselves around certain commonalities like demographics (where people live, what they do, generational issues, gender, civil status, etc.) and the size of the congregation. Size is important because the larger a congregation is, the more independent the subcultures are (Ammerman 1998, 78).

In a nutshell, a group’s culture can be communicated (thus acquired) through the following three general overarching activities: (1) Culture is communicated through relationships as members use their social networks to participate in activities in the life of the group. This participation provides “the glue,” or sense of unity and purpose, that holds the group together and makes people feel welcome. (2) Culture is communicated through language found in metaphors, myths (theological principles as doctrines), narratives (stories of heroes and others), and politics (procedures, organization, and sources of power). (3) Culture is communicated through artifacts that involve structuring time and space. In other words, culture learning is a three fold process of building

relationships by participating in public symbols and practices, acquiring values and language, and developing a specific way of organizing time and space.

The building of a congregation's culture begins, then, with the process of recruiting members. In this process a congregation declares its own perceived identity and is, in turn, changed (even if gradually) by those who choose to join. (Ammerman 1997, 58)

Church (and its Growth)

In this study, "church" will be approached from both a sociological and a theological perspective. The church is both a spiritual body of Christ and a human institution. "Particularly with reference to Church Growth, we are dealing with a sociological theology (or a theological sociology), with all the difficulties which that entails" (Van Engen 1994, 91). Understanding the church through the lens of the Church Growth movement provides a good emphasis on strategies, but it is weak in theology. However, an approach to the church that focuses on its nature as a spiritual body but lacks strategies for accomplishing God's mission⁹ is also problematic. Kingdom theology has often taken this approach. There is no doubt that the church is an expression of God's kingdom on earth. In order to function on earth, however, it needs strategies, and therefore the input of the social sciences, alongside a theological understanding, is necessary to know how to be effective in the cultural and social mosaic of human groups in the world.

The church must follow the lead of its Lord, who is actively involved with God's creation and wants reconciliation. The church is a sign and agent of this universal reconciliation in action. This approach to the church affirms that

numerical Church Growth is a pointer to the fact that the King has come, and the Kingdom is coming. It is a sign, because the numerical growth of the Church is

not the Reality itself—the Kingdom is that reality. It is a sign of the COMING of the Kingdom, because it is not a sign of the PRESENCE of the Kingdom, for it cannot signify all that the Kingdom entails. (Van Engen 1994, 341)

The church does not *do* mission, the church *is* mission, and the mission is God's. Thus, the growth of the church is one element in the mission of God in the world. It is not the most essential element, but it is an important one. This is the balance this dissertation seeks to communicate when talking about the church and its growth from a Kingdom perspective. On the one hand, Church Growth theories are helpful in viewing the church as a human institution (i.e., the church as it is in its humanity). On the other hand, Kingdom theology describes the church as the spiritual body of Christ (i.e., the church as it should be in its divine nature). This study will attempt to hold both of these perspectives in creative tension, recognizing the theological weakness of one (and its strategic-sociological strength), and the strategic weakness of the other (and its theological strength).

Missio Dei

This latin term literally means —God's mission, and implies that mission is primarily God's sending activity that embraces both the church and the world, in which the church may be privileged to participate (Bosch 1991, 391). This conception of the triune God as a missionary God first appeared in a paper read at the Bradenburg Missionary Conference in 1932. Karl Barth became one of the first theologians to articulate mission as God's own nature and activity in the world (Bosch 1991, 389). Then it was at the Fifth International Missionary Council conference (in July 1952 at Willingen, Germany) where delegates affirmed Barth's practical trinitarian theology to

explain that mission is derived from the very nature of God (Thomas 1995, 102; Glasser 2003, 245). Thus, a new theological paradigm in missiology took place: mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God (Bosch 1991, 390). Different theological perspectives, however, may explain *Missio Dei* differently, explaining how much God or the church, or both together, should be involved in that activity. In this study, the researcher will define *Missio Dei* in terms of Kingdom theology (see chapter nine) to emphasize the holistic, inclusive, and diverse activity of the triune God to bring salvation, in terms of *Shalom*, to the world (i.e., the whole creation), while the church seeks and discerns its participation where God is at work in the world. The idea is for the body of Christ to engage the world incarnationally and contextually by imitating God's attributes, seeking inclusiveness and diversity, while participating in God's story to bring reconciliation and to welcome people into God's kingdom.

Research Strategy

The research design followed this sequence. First, the researcher identified and analyzed bibliographical sources from the fields of theology, anthropology, history, and sociology insofar as they provided insights for religious socialization/assimilation studies. After a broad survey of the literature in these areas, the sources most relevant to understanding the assimilation process that takes place in a religious communal context were selected. This also included a brief analysis of data already published and interpreted by the Instituto Internacional de Evangelismo a Fondo (INDEPTH) (*International Institute for In-Depth Evangelization*), SIMER S.A. a marketing research company in Costa Rica, and among others the Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios

Socioreligiosos (PROLADES) (*Latin American Program of Socioreligious Studies*) regarding church filiation, and desertion in Costa Rica.¹⁰

Second, four case studies were compiled, one from each of the following diverse religious groups: Jehovah's Witness, a house church, a Pentecostal (neopentecostal) evangelical megachurch, and a nonpentecostal evangelical megachurch. At each case study site, the following sources of evidence were selected:¹¹

(1) Over a period of four weeks (from four to eight weeks) the researcher selected the newcomers from among each group's new visitors. Depending upon their willingness to participate in the study and their desire to continue visiting the religious group, they were selected as informants for the study.

(2) Each informant provided information from the time of their first visit through six months of participation in the group. The interviews included a series of phone interviews (questionnaire), as well as one final interview (i.e., face-to-face, phone, or via electronic mail).

(3) The researcher conducted research through participant observation in a minimum of four community meetings¹² during the initial time the informants were beginning to attend the religious group.

(4) The pastor or main leader of the congregation were also interviewed along with other leaders and at least two deserters,¹³ to perceive their insights in regards to the socializing force of the religious group.¹⁴ In this fashion the analysis of the information was based on both qualitative (interviews, observations) and quantitative data (surveys).

The following figure illustrates the previous four sources of evidence and how they interact with the units of analysis:

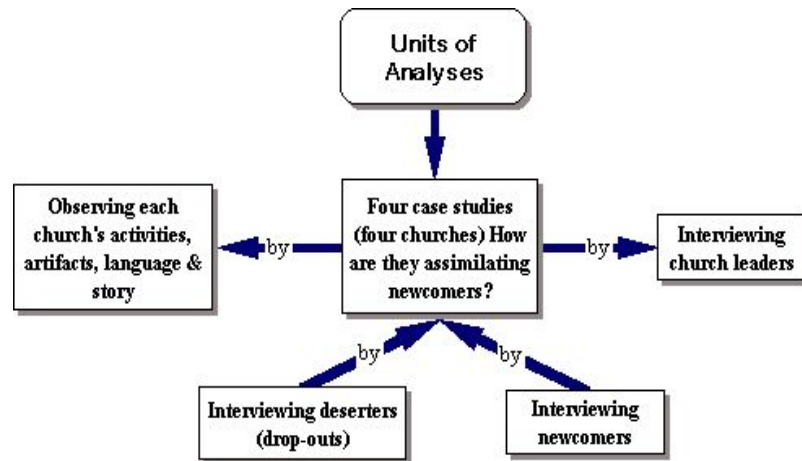


Figure 1. Sources of evidence interacting with units of analyses

Finally, reflecting on these findings and in order to develop specific suggestions and recommendations, the researcher provided missiological insights in the area of religious assimilation studies. These included suggested ways to improve assimilation of newcomers into the life of the church.

Case Study Method

The case study method is a research strategy that provides data in a form that allows the researcher to describe, explain, compare, and evaluate real-life situations in the context where the social phenomena are taking place. More specifically, this research study is based on Robert Yin's *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (1994), which develops this methodology. Yin asserts that "case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context"(1994, 1).

Within the case study approach, a variety of methodologies for gathering data was employed. These included phone survey, and face-to-face interviews. In this study, the case consisted of a church, as a community with its leaders and pastor(s), and the newcomers who attend church, and the deserters who do not attend anymore.

Interviews

Interviews structure a conversation where both participants (researcher and informant) develop meaning together. The researcher can clarify uncertainties with follow up questions.

Compare “when did X happen?”, which asks for a discrete piece of information, with “tell me what happened,” which asks for a more extended account of some past time. It is preferable to ask questions that open up topics and allow respondents to construct answers, in collaboration with listeners, in the way they find meaningful. (Riessman 1993, 54)

The face-to-face interviews followed a phenomenological approach of developing a guide of unstructured open-ended questions. In other words, the role of the researcher was that of interviewer-observer who “only asks enough questions of probes on a limited basis or offers reinforcement to keep a discussion going” (Frey and Fontana 1993, 27).

This phenomenological interview approach “permits greater flexibility in response patterns and probe tactics” (Frey and Fontana, 1993, 27). Thus, from a discussion guideline (based on previous answers), between five to seven broad guided questions are recommended to be developed regarding the topic of inquiry in case the informant needs help getting started (See Appendixes).

Data Collection Plan

Two kinds of data are necessary for this study. There were data (found in activities like educational events, rituals, etc.) about the way religious groups make use of activities (rituals), artifacts (the setting), and language and stories (myths) to socialize their people. Then there were data about the way in which newcomers acquire the church culture through learning and using artifacts, language and stories, and participating in activities. What is this religious group telling these people to do and believe? To answer this question, it was necessary to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin 1994, 78-101).

The following figure illustrates the different sources of evidence.

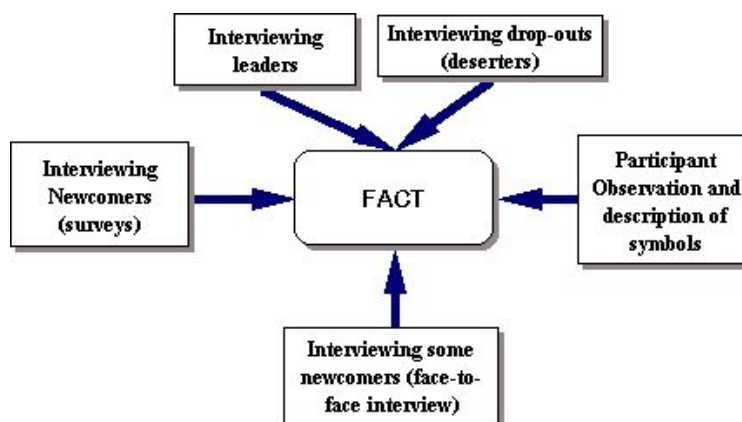


Figure 2. Sources of evidence

The study was framed around four case studies, using the following process. The researcher selected four religious groups in the metropolitan area of San Jose, Costa Rica and found among them new visitors as informants willing to participate in the project.

These religious groups should represent difference in size, doctrinal orientation, and presence in society. Each religious group served as the basis for a separate case study.

Participant Observation

At each case study site, the researcher attended a weekly religious community meeting (i.e. Sunday worship) during the four to eight weeks through the time the newcomers were recruited. During those weeks each reachable visitor was asked if wanting to participate in a study (see appendix “survey card and invitation to participate in the study”). The researcher also participated as a participant-observer with the purpose of making a preliminary identification of the culture of each congregation (according to the definition of culture provided above).

The following figure illustrates the units of analysis that the researcher utilized to collect data during the participant observation.

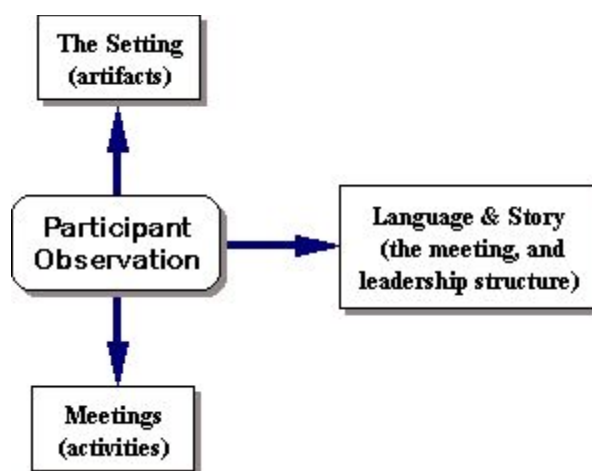


Figure 3. Units of Analysis of the Participant Observation

Thus, the researcher observed the artifacts, activities, and the use of language and stories. Later, the researcher debriefed by reconstructing observations, and also expressed personal feelings (feelings that were bracketed in the description) about the worship service. After that first month, and having the quota of informants completed, the researcher focused on the interviews and the participant observation was completed.

Survey Card and Invitation to Participate in the Study

The researcher with the help of ushers, leaders, or pastors, during worship contacted first time visitors and give them a small survey card at the meeting/service (see appendix). With this card, the visitor answered the contact information (see appendix). Visitors selected if were willing to continue participating in the group, and were willing to participate in the study.

Interviewing Newcomers

This was a longitudinal phone survey-interview. Three phone interviews in a questionnaire format were given to newcomers during the first month (week 1, 2; 4 as month 1). After that, there was one phone call each month (month 1 -as week 4-, 2, 3, 4, 5). The following figure illustrates the units of analyses that the researcher utilized during the longitudinal phone survey-interview.

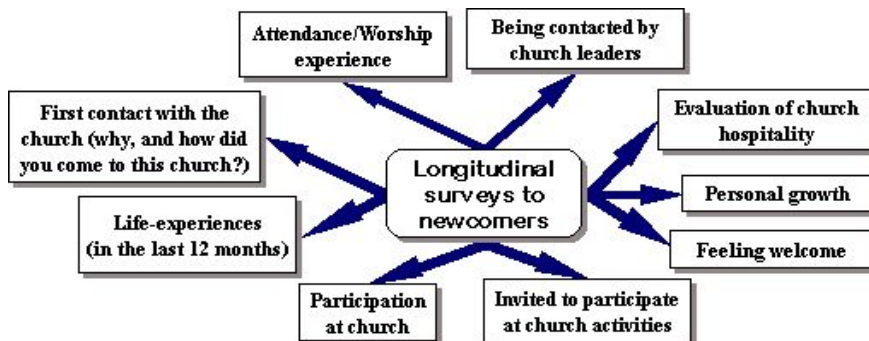


Figure 4. Units of analysis of the longitudinal phone survey-interviews

Finally, there was an exit interview given to two informants of each case study by the end of the six months. The following figure illustrates the units of analysis for the exit interview of the newcomers.

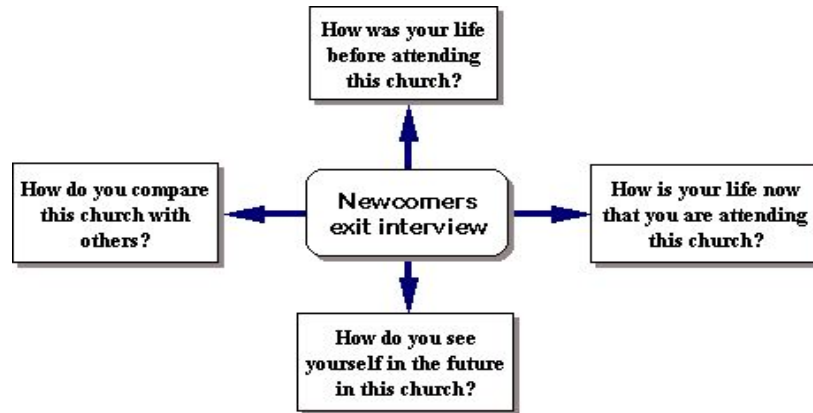


Figure 5. Units of analysis for the newcomers exit interview

Thus, the researcher was looking at Church Growth information and how much the newcomer has acquired the group's culture and if he or she is able to reproduce it (see appendix).

Interviews with Religious Group Leaders

Three leaders, including the pastor/leader if possible, from each religious group was selected to be interviewed about the purpose and history of the group, organizational aspects, and assimilation practices, among other important aspects (see appendix). The following figure illustrates the units of analyses for the interview with the religious group leaders:



Figure 6. Units of Analyses for the Interview of Church Leaders

Interviews with Deserters

Two people who have left each congregation during the six months of research were selected for an “exit interview.” The researcher, with the help of the church leaders and others at church, found contact information for those who had left the church. These informants were asked why they left (see appendix). The following figure illustrates the units of analyses that were used to interview the deserters (drop-outs).

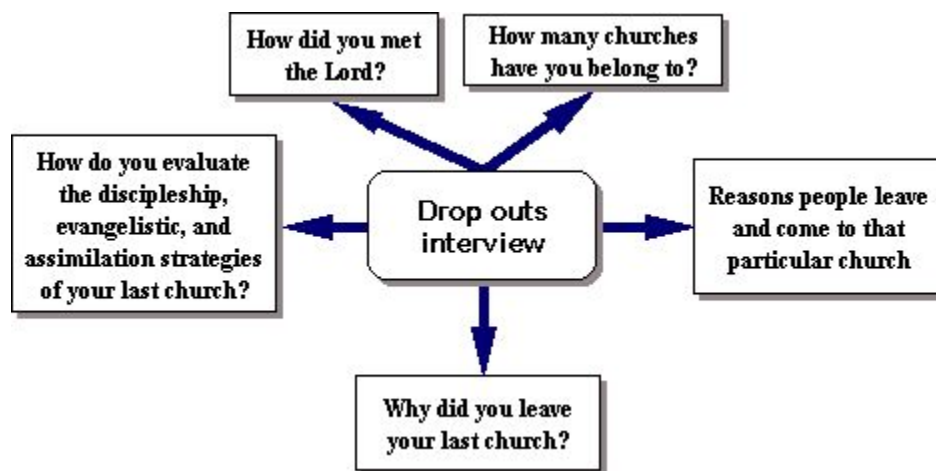


Figure 7. Units of Analysis for the interviews of the deserters or drop-outs

Description of Symbols

The researcher described written material (signs, brochures, and bulletins), sermons and other verbal messages, and other information relevant to the study (e.g., written or oral history of the church). The study included a brief description of the existing relevant church documentation, such as strategic planning, educational material, as well as some archival records, if available. Specifically, the researcher was looking for data on statistical and demographic information on additions, deletions, and inactivity of membership (if any).

Through the analysis of all the above data, the researcher gained a perspective on the church's way on assimilation of newcomers, and the membership process and expectations. By the end of six months the researcher had a *minimum* of 16 informants (from four different religious groups) with a total of 96 phone interviews (questionnaires) and 8 exit interviews. Along with this, as explained already, it also included interviews of one main leader of each group, two other (secondary) leaders, and two deserters.

Analyzing the Evidence

The goal of this part of the study was to analyze how each religious group assimilates newcomers through the use of activities (rituals/relationships), artifacts, and stories (myth), as Ammerman (1997) suggested. What the churches intend to accomplish, and what the newcomer experiences, may be two different things. The selection of the data involved identifying the church's activities, artifacts, and stories at worship, both what they were doing and what they intended to do, and comparing these with the impact of the activities and stories on the newcomers.

Significance of the Study

This study will inform churches (if they show willingness to listen) about the importance of their use of activities like educational and ritual processes, and stories to assimilate newcomers. The more quickly and easily a newcomer acquires the culture of the local church or group, the more likely the newcomer will move from being an outsider to becoming an insider. If religious groups like churches are intentional in helping newcomers acquire the church's culture through stories and activities, religious groups may be able to reduce desertion among newcomers. From the results of these studies, the researcher will recommend ways in which Costa Rican churches should assimilate newcomers more effectively.

Missional Framework

The theoretical framework for this study includes theoretical perspectives on what is necessary for an outsider to become an insider within a religious community, and how those communities should assimilate or include newcomers. Considering that missiology is a multidisciplinary field of study, several theories from the fields of theology, Church Growth, and the social sciences can provide insights to the problem under study.

In other words, there are several areas of different academic disciplines that enrich the missiological research of religious assimilation (Church Growth) and Christian hospitality (Kingdom theology). The following figure in the shape of a pyramid illustrates the different disciplines and their level of emphasis in this dissertation. The size of the rectangle symbolizes the level of importance for each theoretical perspective; the larger the rectangle, the more important they are for the purposes of this study.

At the bottom of the pyramid lies Kingdom theology (as a basis for Kingdom hospitality). Kingdom theology is the foundational base for the missiological reflection of this dissertation. Next, after Kingdom theology follows Church Growth studies (i.e., assimilation studies), another important theoretical support for this dissertation. Then, several smaller boxes on top of the rectangles represent the other disciplines with less importance for their theoretical support.

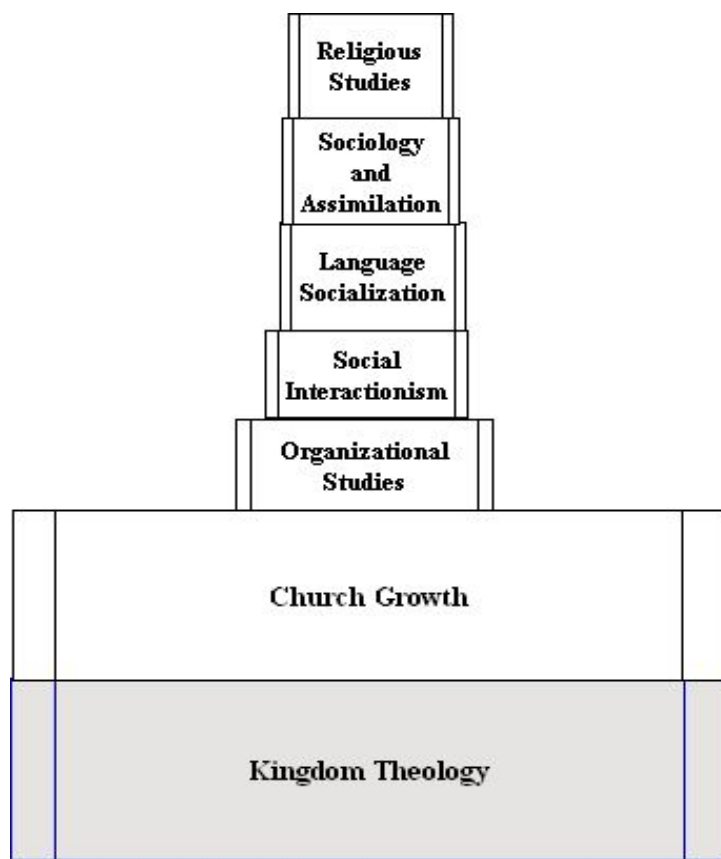


Figure 8. The theoretical weight of the different disciplines in this dissertation

The researcher wants to emphasize again that, on the one hand, assimilation theory (within the Church Growth movement) is theologically weak, and, on the other hand, Kingdom theology (e.g., Christian hospitality) is strategically weak when considering the growth of the church. Both are needed to balance each other out. In the

following sections, the different areas of the theoretical framework will be described, starting from the top of the pyramid in Figure 8.

Religious Studies and Socialization

From an anthropological perspective, the study of socialization involves the way people work their way into new worlds, such as institutions or groups. Clifford Geertz in his article “Religion as a Cultural System” describes the anthropological study of religion in two stages: (1) analyze the system of meanings found in the symbols of the religious practices being interpreted, and (2) relate those systems of meanings to the social structure and psychological processes of the context where the religious practices take place (1966, 42). Geertz conceives culture as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in public symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which humans communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about the attitudes toward life (1966, 3).

Geertz presents culture as a social construction. Humans become social actors by acting according to the system of meanings they have inherited and created. He defines symbols as tangible formulations of notions, concrete expressions of ideas, attitudes or beliefs, which carry or point to a meaning (1966, 5). Symbols as social constructions are public and observable and can be interpreted by insiders. Therefore, according to Geertz, religion is a system of symbols that are vehicles of meaning, and humans depend on them to make sense out of reality (1966, 13).

Socialization (i.e., assimilation/inclusion), thus, involves acquiring what religion should bring to people: a sense of meaning and belonging (cultural learning and social participation). Through participating in rituals, newcomers achieve a constant

incorporation (through participation) of a “model for reality” or *ethos* as a way to bring a sense of purpose or cosmic order into a world of chaos. This is the role of ritual participation: providing an *ethos*.¹⁵

Sociology and Anthropology on Assimilation Studies

Within assimilation studies, from a sociological and anthropological perspective, we can find particularly the classical works of Park and Burgess (1921), Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936), Berry (1951), O’Flannery (1961), and Gordon (1964).

Assimilation studies began with sociologists and anthropologists (from the first half of the twentieth century) researching how social groups integrated outsiders, specifically the integration of immigrants into the larger U.S. society. The researcher, however, wanted to move beyond these scholars to avoid confusion in the use of terms and definitions, because the sociological term of “assimilation” has a negative meaning as losing once identity within a larger group or society.

Language Socialization and Narrative

Garret and Baquedano-Lopez in their article “Language Socialization: Reproduction and Continuity, Transformation and Change” develop a paradigm of the use of language in socialization. First, they define socialization as

the process through which a child or other novice acquires the knowledge, orientations, and practices that enable him or her to participate effectively and appropriately in the social life of a particular community. This process—really a set of densely interrelated processes—is realized to a great extent through the use of language, the primary symbolic medium through which cultural knowledge is communicated and instantiated, negotiated and contested, reproduced and transformed. (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez, 2002, 339)

The authors highlight the importance of how children and “novices are socialized through the use of language” (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002, 339).¹⁶ Their review of the development of language socialization research from the late 1980s to the present affirms the fact that “culture influences all aspects of human development as a lifelong process, of which language acquisition is only one (albeit a crucial one to which many others are closely linked)” (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002, 340).

Social Interactionism: Socialization as a Process

Social interactionism is another theoretical perspective the researcher used to study religious socialization/assimilation. The insights of Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), Berger (1963), and Berger and Luckmann (1966) facilitate viewing socialization as a social construction. It is through this social interaction that a religious community may model the meaning of Christianity to newcomers.

Socialization is a process that society uses to help its people participate in the culture where they belong.¹⁷ This is a lifelong process where humans face their experiences and acquire and reshape their personalities. For instance, the most important socialization happens during childhood where the foundation of human personality takes place. This social interaction, however, only takes place in a structured way where those who interact are capable of interpreting each other. Socialization is a social construction and requires language to take place. Thus, language use helps in the acquisition and interpretation of reality as an intersubjective world.

Organizational Socialization Studies

The organizational structure of an institution also affects socialization. For example, assimilation would most likely take place more rapidly in a military setting than in a church setting because of the intensity (emotional and time consuming) of the participation. However, in a religious group, where the participation is voluntary and probably only once a week, the intensity of the participation may be less and the socialization slow. Thus, in commercial situations, when an employee is asked to rate his or her attitude towards their new role and organization, such as in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to quit, everything depends on the intensity of participation of the newcomer and the socialization tactics of the organization (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson 2002, 434). This can shed light upon the importance of the participation of the newcomer in the life of the church.

Cable and Parsons in “Socialization Tactics and Person-Organization Fit” argue that when “socialization processes cause newcomers’ personal values to become aligned with organizational values, they are more likely to be committed to the organization and less likely to quit” (2001, 1). Newcomers in any new organization will likely find themselves with high levels of anxiety and stress “because they do not possess comfortable routines for handling interactions and predicting the responses from others, and they initially lack identification with the activities going around them,” thus they pay close attention to organizational tactics and messages (2001, 2). This implies that it is necessary for an organization to develop organizational tactics¹⁸ to help its newcomers to be socialized well and promptly.

In the same fashion, Barge and Schlueter in “Memorable Messages and Newcomer Socialization” assume that newcomers are the most attentive to others’

messages during their early weeks as newcomers. . . . [The focus is on] discourse [as] the analytical starting point, which moves us to explore how newcomers are constituted by the discursive formations in which they participate and engage” (2004, 1).

By exploring the message activity of organizational members, we can examine how messages within organizational life connect with larger cultural discourses and explain how they create and sustain particular patterns of individual-organizational relationships. Using the notion of memorable messages, we explore what kinds of messages newcomers attune to during organizational entry and how this influences the way they construct their relationship with an organization. (Barge and Schlueter 2004, 1)

Cooper-Thomas and Anderson in their study “Newcomer Adjustment” state that “recent research has shown that newcomers adjust rapidly to their new organizational context with significant changes typically found three or four months after entry” (2002, 423). These adjustments may have to do with what Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, and Gardner have come to define as the six content dimensions of organizational socialization, which are the following:

- Performance Proficiency: “Learning to perform the required work task is obviously a critical part of socialization” (1994, 731).
- People: “Socialization involves establishing successful and satisfying work relationships with organizational members” (1994, 731).
- Politics: which includes “the individual’s success in gaining information regarding formal and informal work relationships and power structures within the organization” (1994, 732).
- Language: which describes the “individual’s knowledge of the profession’s technical language as well as knowledge of the acronyms, slang, and jargon that are unique to the organization” (1994, 732).

- Organizational goals and values: which has to do with learning group norms and values in the new employee's process of coming to understand unspoken rules, norms, and informal networks.
- History: which describes
 - how an organization's traditions, customs, myths, and rituals are used to transmit cultural knowledge and thereby perpetuate (i.e., socialize) a particular type of organizational member. Knowledge of this history, as well as knowledge about the personal backgrounds of particular organizational members, can help the individual learn what types of behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate in specific interactions and circumstances. (1994, 732)

This shows that each organization, like a religious group or congregation, has its own culture that is transmitted to its new members, according to Ammerman in her article "Culture and Identity in the Congregation." She demonstrates that each congregation develops a complex network of symbols and signals in a subculture that provides them with specific peculiarities, a culture. "Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in" (1998, 78).

No two congregations are alike. Each gathering of people creates its own ways of doing things, its own ways of describing the world, its own tools and artifacts that produce its distinctive appearance. Congregations, in other words, are subcultures within the larger culture. (1998, 78)

Congregations, however, pride themselves as being different from others and from the society in which they live.¹⁹ They are open systems always facing and experiencing change each time a new pastor or members join the group. These differences and similarities have to be learned by new members, new leaders, and/or researchers in order

to learn the new subculture of which they are to be part. “When an anthropologist enters a new culture, the most important thing he or she does is to observe—to watch and listen long enough to know something of what people intend by their actions and what they mean by their words” (Ammerman 1998, 82). Thus, one way to understand the congregational culture and identity is by observing their activities, artifacts, and accounts. “Our sense of who we are is shaped by what we do, what we make, and how we talk about ourselves” (Ammerman 1998, 84).

A local church is an organization and functions like one, says Levinson in his article “Medical Education and the Theory of Adult Socialization.” A local church, like any other organization, makes plans and has a power structure and members. It also has its own worldview, including values, customs, a story, rituals, an organizational climate, etc. From this “secular” perspective, a local church has a culture that needs to be transmitted to new members.²⁰

Organizational socialization studies also seem to emphasize a 50/50 effort between the organization and the newcomer for a right socialization to take place (socialization+individualization= organization assimilation). Newcomers find themselves with high levels of anxiety and stress, which forces them to pay close attention to the group’s story. Those messages (or memorable messages) that compose a story or myth include norms, values, information about social networks, and socialization performances. There is a culture being transmitted, and the organization wants the newcomer to acquire it in order that he or she may become a fully participating member.

Church Growth

Donald McGavran, often called the father of the Church Growth movement, can be considered one of the most influential missiologists in the 20th century. His concern was to see local indigenous churches planted in every human group and growth within receptive groups by conversion. Many have misunderstood McGavran in this issue of “growth.”²¹ The kind of Church Growth that McGavran emphasized was conversion growth.²² This researcher recognizes that there were limitations in McGavran’s theology but praises the early writings of McGavran, where numerical growth was not the goal of mission but a desired by-product.²³

McGavran, in his book *The Bridges of God*, challenged two mission paradigms in full practice at that time; these practices sometimes still prevail today. The first paradigm was the result of the individualistic modern worldview, where conversion was understood as winning one believer at a time. McGavran challenged this assumption with his concept of “people groups,” which are linked to the homogeneous unit principle. For him, certain people groups make group decisions, conserving their group identity. That is, McGavran proposed that clans, tribes, families, and communities can come to Christ, and churches must seek to reach them as such, not just converting one person at a time.

McGavran also argued that our planet is inhabited by a unique, dynamic, and always changing cultural mosaic of peoples.²⁴ “Each . . . tile of the mosaic, will be willing to hear and respond to the Gospel at a different time (when it is ‘ripe’ and ‘receptive’). It will be willing to become Christians for different motives and because of a presentation of the Gospel adapted to its cultural mold” (Van Engen 1994, 290). Within their cultural differences and because of their contextual realities,²⁵ some are receptive to the gospel, others are resistant to the gospel all the time, while others are resistant to the

gospel some of the time.²⁶ This resistance to God is because of sin in the hearts of people, use of wrong methods, and contextual factors. “Fluctuating receptivity is a most prominent aspect of human nature and society” (McGavran 1990, 179).

The advantage, however, of these movements of people is that they provide the soil for indigenous churches rooted outside the mission stations, outside the control of foreign missionaries, and capable of growing via their social networks (e.g., sharing their faith with other family members, friends, co-workers).²⁷ For McGavran, once they have come to Christ they need to be disciplined and then perfected.²⁸ The key objective in mission, for McGavran, is to plant indigenous churches among every people group for the purposes of evangelism via social networks.²⁹ This is the apostolic work according to McGavran: reaching lost people and peoples. In other words, McGavran’s vision was to see churches using the “people movements” model (Church Growth movement), rather than the “mission station” model.

The second paradigm challenged by McGavran was the mission station, claiming what we understand today as the end of the mission colonial era. These were (are) expensive colonies of missionary compounds where the few converts were invited or hired to join in because it was necessary to “civilize” the locals in schools, treat them with Western medicine, and assimilate them in churches planted by missionaries. Through time, the mission station became an end in itself and a segregated community. McGavran also challenged the efforts by traditional denominations of exporting their own style of mono-ethnic churches, instead of planting indigenous churches.

[On the one hand,] the mission station becomes an end in itself, instead of a means to the discipling of peoples. . . . [On the other hand,] a characteristic of a static mission station is that they have an institutional life many times greater than is needed for the little congregation and quite impossible of support by it. The

congregation is made up quite largely of the employees of the big mission institutions. . . . This inevitably creates the idea that to be a Christian is to receive aid from institutions rather than to live a Spirit-filled life. . . . For all these reasons such missions are not likely to start growing churches, no matter how much longer aid from the West is continued. (McGavran 1955, 59, 61)

Church Growth Studies on Assimilation

Church Growth and church consultant experts seemed to have adapted the concept of assimilation to research the way newcomers come to church to become active Christians and participants in the life of a church. Assimilation is not evangelization and it is not helping people become simply an “official member.” From the Church Growth perspective, assimilation is helping people becoming active member of the religious group’s beliefs and practices. The classic studies on assimilation in the Church Growth movement, and church consultant network include the work of Schaller (1978), Oswald and Leas (1987), Braden (1987), Heck (1988), Miller (1990), Savage (1976, 1990), Arn and Arn (1998), McIntosh (1999 and 2006), Searcy (2007), Bast (1988), Gibbs (1994), Rainer (1993, 2008), and Law (2000).

In the book *Attracting New Members*, Robert L. Bast affirms that there are three types of evangelism that are valid and necessary today. The first one based on John 1:41, 42 as personal evangelism, when Andrew sought out for Peter sharing that have found Jesus. Second, public proclamation as Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:36-41; and third, based on Acts 2:41-47 that “describes evangelism through the attracting power of the Christian community” (1988, 8, 9).

Bast affirms three steps for attracting the first-time visitor. First, it is advertising like a visible church sign, publishing a sign in the yellow pages, sending mailing into the neighborhood, and the use of newspapers, and radio, and TV announcements. Second, it

is high quality programming for all ages generating multiple entry points for visitors. Getting to know the community the church is trying to reach out, organizing programs for their needs, as well as reaching out to the unchurched through activities that allow Christians and non-Christians to mutually relate. Third, it is about inviting, and this needs programming. Here Bast is talking about people who are enthusiastic about their faith, their congregation, the leader, where they are expected to invite others, where warmly greet one another and visitors, and where first-time visitors are expected to come (Bast 1988, 45-59).

Herb Miller, in his book *How to Build a Magnetic Church*, mentions that “earlier in this century, mainline denominations relied on three highly successful numerical growth methods: denominational evangelism, biological evangelism, and architectural evangelism” (1987, 18). Today, ten other factors play major roles. First, is a lack of theological motivation for evangelism, like people’s understanding that the Holy Spirit empowers them to share Christ with others. Second is the understanding that the factors that attract people the first time are different from the ones that attract them a second or third time.

The third factor is the inactive member fallacy. . . . But we can attract ten new members to our church with about the same amount of energy it takes to get one inactive person to come back. New member recruitment and inactive member work are two different subjects. Both are important, but neither can substitute for the other. Both should be worked at, but in very different ways. (Miller 1987, 28)

Fourth is the shift in focus from making disciples to serving disciples. The key is for leaders to understand that personal spiritual growth and evangelism are not a by-product of or a substitute for the other. Fifth is the fallacy of spiritual versus numerical growth. Sixth “is the erroneous assumption that ‘everybody in our town already has a

church home” (Miller 1987, 29). Seventh is the predominantly rural perspective of many church leaders. Eighth is the let your light shine fallacy. “A Christian’s life-style rarely by itself produces new Christians. Christianity is communicable, but is seldom caught visually” (Miller 1987, 29). The ninth factor is just plain selfishness. “Church members can erect buildings from the motive of selfish introversion, but evangelistic outreach requires going outside ourselves for the benefit of other people” (Miller 1987, 30). The final factor is “the let’s not play the numbers game cliché”:

The numbers game has often been replaced with the ‘leave them alone’ game By leaving people alone, we are: (1) deciding not to care about them, which violates the Great Commandment, and (2) deciding not to care what Jesus told us to do, which violates the Great Commission. (Miller 1987, 30)

Suzanne G. Braden, in her book *The First Year: Incorporating New Members*, highlights that people come to church with two needs. First, “people come to our churches looking for hope and for meaning in their lives. . . . People want the church to help them see how God is involved in their everyday lives” (Braden 1987, 27). That, is people come to church because some life experience has shaken their world, and now they are looking for more meaning. Churches must develop ways to allow the newcomer to grow spiritually, and develop his or her full potential. Second, “newcomers bring with them as they begin the process of being incorporated is the need to know and to be known by other members, to feel accepted into the life and ministry of the congregation” (Braden 1987, 29). That is, newcomers need to develop a sense of belonging and a sense of contribution to the community.

For Braden, “a well incorporated new member is likely to be described as a person who:

- Feels the congregation is helping him or her grow spiritually.
- Has personal friends within the congregation.
- Has identified a gift or calling and is exercising that gift or calling, perhaps through some job or leadership role in the congregation.
- Understands, identifies with, and supports the history and current goals of the congregation.
- Is involved in the worship life of the congregation.
- Is excited about the congregation and naturally invites unchurched friends to participate in church activities.
- During a newcomer's first months of membership, the congregation must be intentional about helping the newcomer connect with this points of contact, points of bonding with the congregation. (Braden 1987, 6-7)

The incorporation of someone into a church is not automatic, however, and must be the church who should feel responsible for such incorporation. When a person joins, a church expects to find a safe place to grow spiritually and build meaningful relationships. There we can perceive the importance of the church organizing a system for assimilation.

In his book *Beyond the First Visit*, Gary McIntosh states, “if our churches are going to grow, we must become better hosts” (2006, 20). Now, most churches consider themselves to be friendly, “but it is only friendly to the degree that those visiting our church perceive it to be so” (McIntosh 2006, 9). Helping newcomers to feel welcome must be the task of church people as hosts.

True friendliness begins with welcoming newcomers to our church as honored guests. . . . I suggest that we begin getting ready for company by eliminating the term visitor from our church vocabulary. It is place let's insert the term guest . . . Visitors are often unwanted; guests are expected. Visitors just show up; guests are invited. Visitors are expected to leave; guests are expected to stay. Visitors come one time; guests return again. (McIntosh 2006, 13, 14)

McIntosh developed a tool to evaluate the quality of friendliness in a church, meaning, every time guests enter a church they encounter certain standard Moments of Truth (MOT). The author established eleven Movements Of Truth: (1) Receiving an

invitation to church; (2) Driving by the church building; (3) Walking to the front door; (4) Entering the front door; (5) Meeting people; (6) Experiencing ministries and services; (7) Entering the Sanctuary; (8) Participating in the worship service; (9) Leaving the worship service; (10) Being contacted during the week; (11) Ongoing contacts in the future (McIntosh 2006:32-38). These Moments Of Truth (MOT) will be developed in detail in chapter 9.

Nelson Searcy, in his book, *Fusion: Turning first-time guests into fully-engaged members of your church*, states that an “Assimilation systems builds a bridge allowing those in the crowd a way to cross into the congregation. That big bridge is composed of three sections—three smaller bridges, if you will—that allow your guests to move from step 1 to step 2 to step 3” (2007, 45). The diagram is as follows,



Figure 9. Assimilation Process, adapted from Searcy (2007, 45)

The gray boxes in between the steps are gaps that need to be bridged.

“Assimilation System bridges the gaps, providing a smooth path for every new person to walk on a journey from first-time guests to member” (Searcy 2007, 46).

The author’s assimilation system consists of three steps when the guests are properly *greeted, directed, treated, and seated* (pre-service), and then encourage them to complete a *Communication Card* (during the service). Then a *fast, friendly, and functional* follow up seeks to lead the guests to a second visit and experience the same

process of the first visit (post-service). This time, as second-time guests are encouraged to sign up behind on the back of the *Communication Card* for *three sticky situations* like (short-term) *small groups, fun events, and service teams* (during the service). As they continue to attend, the guests are motivated to take responsibility within the church, which would lead to a sense of ownership (identity). Then, by becoming members they are encourage to participate in multiplying worship service opportunities, teaching, and regular signups.

Assimilation is not the only system that can help your church grow. Like the human body, the Church is made up of a network of systems that work together to produce optimal health. There's the Evangelism System, the Worship-Planning System, the Ministry System, the Small Group System, the Strategic System, the Stewardship System, the Leadership System, and, of course, the Assimilation System. But of the eight systems, the Assimilation System is the one that can most easily stand on its own. The other systems are more intricately intertwined. (Searcy 2007, 160-161)

Lyle Schaller, in his book *Assimilating New Members*, builds the first chapter on this question: What is the basic organizing principle that holds a congregation together? The answer depends on the size of the congregation and finding out what “the glue” for that size congregation is. That glue, an organizing principle, can be the nationality or ethnic-language factor; the denominational identity; the personality and magnetism of the minister; a specific, attainable, measurable, highly visible, and unifying task; or kinfolk ties (Schaller 1988, 24-36).³⁰ These organizing principles may hold people together, but they also can become exclusionary elements. That is, the same factors that keep a congregation together can also keep outsiders apart from it. Every church includes and excludes certain people with certain characteristics more easily than others. People, who are from a different ethnic-linguistic group, young or old, single or divorced, in wheelchairs, handicapped, mentally retarded, homosexual, or childless couples, can

become good examples of those that churches often exclude unintentionally (Schaller 1988, 38-50).

The key, then, is minimizing the “we-they” division, while revising traditional systems of decision-making and governance of the church. Another option is to develop as many fellowship groups as possible to create more options for belonging. “In general, the longer the congregation has been functioning from this same location, the greater the need for this ratio of six or seven small face-to-face groups per one hundred members” (Schaller 1988, 96). According to Schaller, there are barriers that work as dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. He describes every congregation as having two concentric circles that work as barriers.³¹ Those within the inner circle tend to refer to themselves as “we,” while those in the outer circle tend to refer to the church as “they.” Senior pastors usually are located in the middle of the inner circle, and associate pastors tend to locate themselves in the outer circle. Those within the inner circle do not tend to see any problem with being a barrier for others.

Something to learn from Schaller’s theory of circles is that a “congregation which seeks to grow should look at how friendship ties can be increased between individual members and those persons who are not active members of any worshiping congregation” (1988, 75). For Schaller, there are four routes to inclusion where newcomers can be located within the first year of uniting with any congregation.³² Those less likely to become inactive are in the following order: 1) those who become part of a small group (through meaningful relationships) in the church before formally joining the congregation; 2) those who develop meaningful relationships in a small group after joining the congregation; 3) those who accept a role or office, or 4) those who accept a

task or job as a worker in the church to help themselves feel assimilated. Those who do not fit into any of the previous categories are inactive, or are in the process of inactivity or the process of dropping out of the church.

Oswald and Leas in *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* discuss “what happens to people as they discover, explore, and then join a local congregation” (1997, 3). They explore the aspects that affect growth and assimilation, discussing those that are outside the control of the local congregation (population trends, demographic factors, and denominational identity) and those that are internal to the congregation (the congregational sense of mission and its internal life). All of these affect those who stay and those who go.

There are a number of things that the church can do from the inside to help promote growth, even in situations where the environmental factors are clearly stacked against the congregation. Most important are:

- A clear identity
- Congregational harmony and cooperation
- A pastor who generates enthusiasm
- A warm and inviting welcome
- A place to land. (Oswald and Leas 1997, 87)

The book, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*, by Joel Heck states that the problem of “backdoor” loss of membership is a two-sided coin: one side is prevention, and the other is cure.

“Assimilation helps to prevent both inactivity on the part of the new member and the eventual walk out the back door, while ministry to inactives works to solve the problem of inactivity after it has already begun” (Heck 1988, 9). According to the author, the best place to prevent backdoor losses is at the frontdoor.

The author highlights that in churches with active outreach ministries, assimilation becomes a problem, especially among churches with a Sunday morning worship attendance of over 80 people. “While more persons may join the church, the back door will open wider and wider” (Heck 1988, 30).

For every ten people who visit your church, three should be actively involved within a year. Some churches have learned that about four of every ten local visitors come back a second time. A strategy that focuses on these second-time visitors can result in about three-fourths of them joining within a year, hence the 3:10 ratio. (Heck 1988, 33)

In *One Size Doesn't Fit All*, Gary McIntosh develops in detail the importance of understanding that assimilation strategies in order to be effective depend on the size of the church: “the Small church functions as a big happy family, the medium church as a collection of subgroups, and the large church as an organization” (1999, 30). For the author, the size variable, as a tool to compare churches, is more important than location, and denomination. Table 1 summarizes details of the book:

Table 1. Adapted from “McIntosh’s Typology of Church Sizes” (1999, 143-144)

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Small Church</i>	<i>Medium Church</i>	<i>Large Church</i>
Size	15-200 worshippers	201-400 worshippers	401+ worshippers
Orientation	Relational	Programmatical	Organizational
Structure	Single cell	Stretched cell	Multiple cell
Leadership	Resides in key families	Resides in Committees	Resides in selected leaders
Pastor	Lover	Administrator	Leader
Decisions	Made by the congregation (driven by history)	Made by Committees (driven by changing needs)	Made by staff and leaders (driven by vision)
Staff	Bivocational or single pastor	Pastor and small staff	Multiple staff
Change	Bottom up through key people	Pastor and small staff	Multiple staff
Growth Patterns	Attraction model through relationships	Program model through key ministry	Proclamation model through word of mouth
Growth Obstacles	-Small-church image -Ineffective evangelism	-Inadequate facilities -inadequate staff -Inadequate finances	-Poor assimilation -Increased bureaucracy

	-Inadequate programming -Downward momentum -Ingrown fellowship	-Poor administration -Increasing complexity	-Poor communication -Loss of vision -Lack of member care
Growth Strategies	-Renew a sense of purpose -Begin new ministries -Cultivate evangelism -Celebrate victories -Start new groups/classes -Involve new people	-Develop distinct identity -Add additional staff -Use facilities multiple times -Offer multiple worship services -Write a long range plan -Improve quality of ministry	-Renew the vision -Design assimilation plan -Streamline procedures -Offer need-based events -Adjust leadership roles -Increase the number of small groups

According to John Savage (1990), life crisis may take place as one critical incident at church when the feelings of the person were hurt, or something shameful in the life of a person happened and pushed the person not to come back to church. Thus, the person stayed away from church several Sundays, and no one came to visit, or made even a phone call. The shameful or painful experience becomes hurt and anger. During the interviews of the drop-outs from the evangelical churches, these feelings were revealed by the informants.

After weeks, the inactive person may develop feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, anger, hostility, and anxiety. Most inactive members send these signals to the church. This highlights the importance of calling and providing caring listening before those feelings sink in, and the person who calls has to know how to handle and help someone with those feelings. Then, even if the church assumes that pastoral and communal care is effective and efficient, then the church needs a backup system to reach and minister to those who may fall in the cracks of the church's caring system (e.g., small

groups). Therefore, the challenge any church may face is preventing the inactive person from becoming nominal.

Eddie Gibbs states that nominality is a fluctuating and selective condition (1994, 14). This fluctuation and confusing condition between the church and the world creates a “nominality zone.” This fluctuating condition explains why a life crisis may push a person away from church, or may bring a person back to church.

According to Gibbs a nominal Christian is someone who,

for whatever reason, wants to be known as Christian, even though may have lost contact with the church, have serious doubts concerning beliefs basic to Christianity, be living lifestyles which are incompatible with the values of the Kingdom of God, or be failing to maintain an ongoing relationship with the Lord due to neglect of the means of grace which He has provided for our spiritual sustenance. (1994, 15)

A nominal person is someone who belongs to a particular faith in name only. In order to describe this dynamic phenomenon, Gibbs presents a scale of commitment to the local church, which will be presented in the form of a continuum (1994:32-33).



Figure 10. Based on the “Scale of Commitment to the Local Church” (Gibbs 1994, 32)

Starting from left to right on the continuum, there are active regular attendees and these range through stages to the far right with the notional attendees. First, there are those who attend worship services actively (more than once a month) and contribute to the life of the local church. Second, there are the passive regular attendees as those who attend worship services more than once a month and do not contribute to the life of the local church. Third, occasional attendees are those who attend once a month or less, or

just for major festivals or special services. Fourth, there are the lapsed members/attendees, those who at one time were either regular or occasional attendees of worship services but have ceased to attend for one year or more and have not transferred to a different church. Fifth, there are the nominal attendees those who would identify with a particular faith or denomination and they have been lapsed members for a long time. They associate with their faith because of family links, cultural expectations, or restrict their relationship to rites of passage. Finally, at the end of the continuum we have the notional type. They are those who identify themselves as “Christians” but have never been churchgoers, and would not identify with any particular denomination. “Their attitude to institutional Christianity may range from indifference to hostility” (Gibbs 1994, 33).

People may flow from one category to another. “Nominality is not a static state but rather a fluctuating and selective condition. It is characterized by contradictory behavior” (Gibbs 1994, 14).³³ The causes of nominalism, as already explained, can be found in the relationship between the church and the world, creating the nominal zone in between. On the one hand, when the church does not correctly equip believers on how to bear witness, a sense of isolation facing the struggles and pressures in the world moves the believer to develop a double moral set to live in the two worlds, secular and religious. On the other hand, believers get burned out because of over commitment and unreasonable expectations, or because of conflict and abuse in the church.

Eric Law in his book *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace* stated that every community has boundaries. These boundaries mark who belongs and who does not. Boundaries may provide protection and uphold the identity and vitality of the

community. Groups construct boundaries against “others” through attitudes like insecurities, legalism, and control. Thus, “exclusion, as a way to create boundaries, has its place in the preservation of the community, but it should not overshadow the work of including those who are outside the community. Inclusion of outsiders weighs much more than the preservation of the existing community” (2000, 14). Sometimes the boundary of a community gets too loose, resulting in the community accepting everyone without concerns. On other occasions, the boundary may be too tight, rejecting anyone who does not look like “us.”

The boundary function of a community is the mechanism by which a person or group is accepted as a full member of the community—is transformed from being “them” to “us” Most organizations consider the space within their boundaries as a safe zone in which, as the label connotes, the members feel safe and secure. . . [Thus,] only those who do not present a threat to the organization can enter. (Law 2000, 18)

Exclusive organizations have three mechanisms to make their boundary functional. Organizations have a standard against which they measure or qualify newcomers. The first mechanism is comparing the outsider “with a prototype,” an ideal member in the community. The second mechanism is the “legal operation.” Even if the newcomer fits the prototype and enters the organization, the person must follow the explicit and implicit rules of the organization; meanwhile the person is being evaluated. The third and last mechanism is the “political operation.” “Even when you fit the prototype and follow all the rules, you may still be excluded if you do not get along with the influential and powerful members of the organization. They are the gatekeepers of the organization; everyone who enters the organization must meet their approval” (Law 2000, 21). Hence, having an exclusive boundary simplifies the way of dealing with

differences within any church or organization. The community simply needs to compare the newcomer with the prototype. If the person does not fit the prototype, he or she is out!

An exclusive organization has very little or no room between the safe zone and the fear zone. Its members are easily threatened if they are being pushed or pulled out of their safe zone. . . . This narrow space between the safe zone and the fear zone provides little room or time to negotiate, explore, or engage in dialogue. It has no room for grace. (Law 2000, 19)

Conversely, an inclusive community recognizes the importance of boundaries but believes that Christ's compassion is boundless and God's love is so abundant that God can love everyone on earth—not just those of us who think we are doing what is right in God's sight, not just those who think and act like us. God's grace is extended to those with whom we do not get along; to those who we think are our enemies, to those who we think are sinners. (Law 2000, 35)

Jesus provided many examples of expanding the boundaries in the telling of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son as ways to stretch the Jewish legalistic and political boundaries. Jesus wanted to create inclusion³⁴ for table fellowship; this is the reason to assimilate newcomers.

Inclusion is a discipline of extending our boundary to take into consideration another's needs, interests, experience, and perspective, which will lead to clearer understanding of ourselves and others, fuller description of the issue at hand, and possibly a newly negotiated boundary of the community to which we belong. (Law 2000, 42)

Law (2000) goes on to describe what he has coined as the “grace margin”, a model to transform “a community from within, moving from being an exclusive community toward being a gracious, inclusive body of Christ” (, xiii). Several concepts are mentioned in this model, which are important to define. First, the concept of fear zone, which is, understood as the world “out there,” where the “other” is. Second, we find the safe zone, which is the world “in here,” where “we” are, like inside of the church. We can imagine those two zones as two circles, where the safe zone circle is inside of the

fear zone one, like drawing the idea of the local church inside of the world. Now, if the safe zone of a congregation is too big there is no space between “the safe world in here” and the “the fear world out there” to welcome and include people. Thus, the key is to draw both boundaries of each zone, but allowing space between them for the grace margin. This grace margin becomes an environment created by the local congregation to meet those from “the world out there” without compromising the safe zone.



Figure 11. Grace Margin, modified from Law (2000, 43)

The grace margin model works as follows. There are two circles and three environments in the above figure. The inner circle is “the safe zone,” the outer circle is the “grace margin,” and outside the circles lays “the fear zone.”³⁵ Thus, the first step in developing the “grace margin” is making explicit the “safe zone boundary”³⁶ to help the local church increase the community’s sense of security while doing outreach.

Second, after highlighting the “safe zone,” it is important to mark the outer parameter as a way to extend the boundary “as we come face-to-face in the grace margin with others who are different” (Law 2000, 44). It is within the grace margin where the

local church invites people in to share their stories and to listen compassionately to one another. The grace margin provides a space and time for self-examination and reflection, before the community opens its safe zone to include outsiders. If the boundary is challenged, it is important for the leaders of the community to avoid making quick decisions that may end up in exclusion practices. “The work of inclusion is not just a human endeavor. It has divine implications, because as we reveal ourselves and our communities’ experiences of God to one another, we are participating in the revelation of God” (Law 2000, 47).

Thus, in order for the grace margin to exist, the community needs to step outside its safe zone and draw an outer parameter. This can happen by negotiating a behavioral covenant among believers “that describes the respectful grace-filled relationship among the parties involved [insiders and outsiders]” (Law 2000, 61). Three steps are necessary for the “grace margin” to survive. First, a space and time to meet “outsiders” must be created. Second, the church members need to develop a covenant that will enable them to articulate what they will and will not do in their use of that time. Finally, the community should be studying and raising up a variety of images and concepts of God on Kingdom hospitality (Law 2000, 83).

For the Christian community,

Christ invites us to step outside our safe zone and enter the grace margin through his actions, stories, and parables, or through his redirecting of the questions people asked him. Sometimes Christ’s invitation to enter the grace margin can be gentle and compassionate; sometimes the invitation can be confusing, if not shocking. But the grace margin keeps us from moving into the fear zone too quickly and making judgments without considering any other perspectives. The grace margin provides time and space for us to maintain an openness to explore—to listen and discover and reflect. (Law 2000, 43)

George Hunter III (1987), in his book *To Spread the Power*, mentions six general Church Growth strategic principles (, 36). His six mega-strategies are (1) Identifying receptive people to reach, (2) Reaching across social networks of credible believers, (3) organizing new recruiting groups and ports of entry, (4) ministering to the needs of people, (5) indigenizing ministries to fit the culture of the people, and (6) Prayerful planning to achieve the future God has intended for the church. The first three mega church strategies are to attract people, while the last three may have to do with keeping them, and the best way to keep people at church is by caring for and training them to engage the world in mission.

Different ports of entry may attract people to church, but the church needs to consider ways to keeping those newcomers, by closing the back door. From a North American context, Schaller in his book *44 Steps up off the Plateau* argues that there are several signs that suggest that a church is about to decline in numbers, or to drift off onto a plateau (1993, 42-46). The majority of these signs have to do with a drop in the commitment and attendance level of the church people; and the lack of effective leadership. When newcomers are not cared for they may become inactive (low or no commitment), then drop the church for another one, or completely quit attending church. The menace of assimilation is around the corner if churches do not provide a good system of assimilation to newcomers.

All of these authors seem to operate with the assumptions that the cultures around the local church are receptive to the gospel, and that there is nothing theologically wrong with the churches, but they simply lack outreach and attention to newcomers. It is noticeable, as well, that there is a lack of theological language in their writings, and

strong suggestions for marketing and consumer care-focused programs. In other words, the social strategic language overshadows any theological language in their discourse.

Biblical-Theological Studies: Welcoming People to the Kingdom through the Church

Kingdom theology is not a movement or a theological orientation in particular. By Kingdom theology the researcher means bringing together different authors from different theological disciplines who have written on the theme of the Kingdom of God. This theme is “a key thread in Scripture, tying the whole Bible together. It is not the only unifying theme, nor should it replace other themes which are clearly biblical. Yet it is a critically important theme, especially today” (Snyder, 1985, 12). The Kingdom theme has to do primarily with the rule of Christ, as the king over all creation, sin and death, and the church’s role as a sign and agent of God’s Kingdom. The ecclesiological implications of the Kingdom were well illustrated by N.T. Wright when he said, “What Jesus was to Israel, the church must now be for the world. Everything we discover about what Jesus did and said within the Judaism of his day must be thought through in terms of what it would look like for the church to do and be this for the world. If we are to shape our world, and perhaps even to implement the redemption of our world, this is how it is to be done” (1999, 53).

This section on Kingdom theology is divided into four subsections. The first section is the message of the Kingdom. N.T. Wright and Joel Green provide us with an overview of a biblical theology of the Kingdom. The second section is on the Kingdom metanarrative.³⁷ Wright, Pohl, Geitz, Keifert, and Matson provide a perspective of how

table-fellowship was a way for the primitive church to practice hospitality, welcoming strangers as guests into the Kingdom. The third section is on *misión integral* (integral or holistic mission) with the purpose of bringing into dialogue one of the most important Latin American missiologists (C. Renee Padilla) with a key North American scholar (Howard Snyder) on how to bring Kingdom theology into practice. The final section is on Kingdom hospitality and the growth of the church. Charles Van Engen provides a way to combine Church Growth with Kingdom theology by arguing his idea of "yearning," and Orlando Costas gives a multidimensional model for evaluating the growth of the church as an aspect of the Kingdom.

The Message of the Kingdom

The message of Jesus, the story, can be summarized around his proclamation on the Kingdom. Mark 1.15 “the time has been fulfilled; the kingdom of God has drawn near.” Somehow, his audience had an understanding of “the Kingdom” from the Old Testament, mostly from the prophets. “For example, Isaiah 24:1-27:13 describes the triumph of God over all nations, while portraying God as Deliverer and Sovereign King. . . [In Isaiah 40] Isaiah anticipates the necessity of preparing for the arrival of the King (v.3)” (Green 1989, 18). This is the gospel: the announcement of the victory of the Lord and his coming to bring salvation or a new creation of *Shalom*.

Moreover, N.T. Wright has noted that the Kingdom was the central message of Jesus “but there has been no agreement on what precisely that phrase and the cognate ideas that go with it actually meant” (1999, 34). In order to capture that meaning, Wright goes on to discover the meaning of that phrase in the context of a first-century Jew.³⁸ For instance, Jesus believed that the Creator had purposed from the beginning to deal with the

problems within his creation through Israel. That is, Israel had a calling, an election and an eschatological purpose: “God’s choice of Israel to be the means of saving the world; God’s bringing of Israel’s history to its moment of climax, through which justice and mercy would embrace not only Israel but the whole world” (1999, 35).

Joel Green adds three essential features to understand how Jesus’ contemporaries have understood the Kingdom

First, the kingdom of God entails the restoration of Israel, but is not limited to its national boundaries. God’s kingdom is cosmic in its proportions and so must address all the nations of the world. Second, the kingdom of God is nothing less than the coming of God to set things right. God’s rule spells justice, the triumph of righteousness, and establishment of peace in the world, shalom. Third, the kingdom of God has to do with the coming *of God*. That is, anticipation of universal shalom was not necessarily tied to a messiah or messianic figure. To proclaim the arrival of the kingdom would be to announce the arrival of God to rule. (2003, 105)

Therefore, it can be concluded that the kingdom of God is not a place, which can be called heaven, where God’s people will go after death. The Kingdom refers to “the rule of heaven, that is, of God, being brought to bear in the present world” (N.T. Wright 1999, 37).

First-century Jews knew that God intended to bring justice and peace (salvation as new creation) to God’s world here and now. “Scripture as a whole presumes the intertwining of salvation as healing.... Healing is God’s setting things right [shalom]” (Green 2003, 35, 47). Jesus’ mission was “opening the way for the inclusion of people in God’s kingdom, for salvation, who otherwise have no apparent claim on God. They are the poor to whom Jesus proclaims ‘good news’.... [that] embraces the widow, the unclean, the Gentile, and all others whom society regards as misfits and outcasts” (Green 2003, 109).

A Kingdom Metanarrative for Inclusion

Within this Kingdom-message, Jesus used the image of feasting as a way to picture the inclusiveness of the Kingdom.

The meals spoke powerfully about Jesus' vision of the kingdom; what they said was subversive of other kingdom-agendas. Jesus' welcome symbolized God's radical acceptance and forgiveness and a God-given now start in terms of the Temple and its cult, Jesus was offering it on his own authority and without requiring any official interaction with Jerusalem. (N.T. Wright 1999, 45)

The Lord's Supper and its tokens symbolize in celebration and intimacy the suffering, the new life, and the mystery of the past, present, and future of the church in relation to Christ. This welcoming to the table-fellowship allows the host to meet the guest: Christ. Christ Jesus calls for reconciliation at the table, but for the sojourners to join that table, the body of Christ must be inviting and welcoming. This is the gospel of the Kingdom in action.

This metanarrative includes the famous metaphor found in Genesis 18:1-15 that tells us the story of three heavenly strangers whom Abraham reached out in hospitality offering them a meal and a place to stay. While eating, one of the strangers gave them the news that Sarah will become pregnant. Thus, this story has become a metaphor for all abrahamic religions: It can be never known if the strangers the church is hosting are bearers of blessings from God. Within the Christian narrative, Hebrews 13:2 reflects that abrahamic metaphor "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Equally, if the church does not receive the stranger warmly, at the end of the days, it will be received by God in the same fashion.

"Hospitality meant extending to strangers a quality of kindness usually reserved for friends and family" (Pohl 1999, 19). Hospitality (*philoxenia*)³⁹ refers

not only to a love and acceptance of strangers, but also to a delight in the whole guest/host relationship, in the mysterious reversals and gains for both parties that may occur. For those who believe, this delight is fueled by the expectation that God will play a role in the guest/host encounter. (Geitz 1993, 45)

The metanarrative tells us that Israel once was a stranger whom God's grace hosted becoming then "the people of God." "For the people of ancient Israel, understanding themselves as strangers in their midst, was part of what it meant to be the people of God" (Pohl 1999, 5). God became the host of Israel, and Israel must become the host to the stranger. Leviticus 19:33-34, and 1 Kings 8:41-43 exhorts the acceptance and incorporation of the stranger in societal as well as cultural (worship) ways. "Similarly, God as host, as giver, must appear for us to learn how to host the stranger" (Keifert 1992, 61).

"What separates as a Christian community is precisely how we welcome those who may be unwelcome in other settings" (Geitz 1993, 23). Jesus' teachings, and the news about him, became possible depending on the hospitality of others.

Luke-Acts strengthen this metanarrative of table-fellowship (welcoming the stranger⁴⁰) where the host and the stranger may switch places at any time. Jesus is born as the stranger, and welcomes strangers, even the Magi, the first pagan aliens who travel to meet the King. David L. Matson highlights a pattern of household conversion stories (centered on proclamation, baptism, and hospitality) in Luke-Acts, where Jesus not only practiced in word and deed household mission, but also commanded his 72 disciples (Luke 10) to evangelize households (bless the household, drink and eat whatever they feed you).

The proclamation of the Kingdom had a symbolic meaning: "Jesus instructs his messengers to enter houses, bring salvation to households, and stay in houses for table-

fellowship” (Matson 1996, 82). In Acts, one finds several parallels to Luke with Cornelius (10:1-11:18), Lydia (16:11-15), the Roman jailer (16:25-34), and Crispus (18:1-11), who are four household converts (with their whole household [*oikos, oikia*] as an example of church reaching through relationships⁴¹).

From Luke’s perspective, the household conversion stories provided a context for a new social order and understanding of the Kingdom. Jesus became the Lord of the household, where hospitality was shared across ethnic, social, gender and age boundaries. A new institution was born, as a new community of faith with a new head of the household who brought new order with a new worldview that challenged even the Empire. These households as alternative institutions (churches) began shaping human consciousness in a different way. They provided a new story, language, and rituals in a context of a new community with a new meaning in the form of the Graeco-Roman world.

Thus around a meal anyone was invited to join these communities. Even the itinerant missionary at times was a stranger, thus, hospitality to the stranger and specially the marginalized was a common practice. “The church is a hospitable, nurturing, and mothering community that in its nurturing remains open to the stranger” (Keifert 1992, 72-73). A community centered in Christ, therefore must be centered in the stranger, the other, who needs to be assimilated/included into the Kingdom, to fully understand the King of the universe.

Misión Integral

Misión Integral is a Spanish term that translated basically means holistic mission. This term was coined by Latin American evangelical scholars who reacted against the

dualistic North Atlantic⁴² theological interpretations of separating the social responsibilities of the church from evangelization and prioritizing the latter. For Latin American theologians, the Kingdom of God theme provides a way to unify that division.

C. Rene Padilla has been the iconic representative of *misión integral* in and from Latin America. In his book *Mission Between the Times* he affirms that “the mission of the church, therefore, can be understood only in light of the Kingdom of God” (1985, 186). That is, the mission of the church is an extension of the mission of Jesus. “The New Testament presents the church as the community of the Kingdom in which Jesus is acknowledged as Lord of the universe and through which, in anticipation of the end, the Kingdom is concretely manifested in history” (1985, 189-190).

In the article “La Misión de la Iglesia a la Luz del Reino de Dios” (The Mission of the Church In the Light of the Kingdom of God), Padilla states that the message of the Kingdom is “something that can be seen and heard” (1991, 20). Thus, evangelization and social responsibility are inseparable. This message is a historical fact, of public interest, that affects all human life, and is news that calls humans to repentance and faith as part of a new humanity. Good works are the signs of the Kingdom. “The kingdom of God is . . . an expression of the final government of God in all creation, the same that in anticipation of the end, has become present in the person and work of Jesus Christ ” (1991, 27, translation mine). The Church is called to manifest the kingdom of God here and now in word and deed.

Furthermore, Padilla argues, in his article “Una Ecclesiología para la Misión Integral” (An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission), that in order to accomplish integral mission it is necessary to have an integral church. The following four characteristics for

an integral church are highlighted by Padilla: (1) a commitment towards Christ as Lord of everything and everyone and an ecclesiology based on Christological principals; (2) the active participation of all believers in God's mission, in terms of discipleship as a missionary lifestyle; (3) a biblical view of the church, meaning that guided by Christ's lordship the church follows Christ's example of incarnation through His ministry, His cross, His resurrection, and His ascension, including the coming of the Spirit to empower the church to affect the whole world; (4) an emphasis on gifts and ministries as ways that the Spirit trains the church to affect the world.

Howard Snyder is not a Latin American theologian, but he has written similar reflections, in the North Atlantic setting, to the theological concerns of C. Rene Padilla. In his book *A Kingdom Manifesto* he suggests sixteen kingdom operating principles (1985, 111-120). The theological parallels between Padilla and Snyder are surprising. Snyder's work is helpful to operationalize Padilla's ideas. The following is a summary of Snyder's operating principles.

For Snyder, the church needs biblically defined leadership; this calls the people of God to review the biblical qualifications for selecting its leaders. There is Scriptural evidence related to the appointment of elders in each church (Acts 14:23) to direct the affairs of the church (1 Timothy 5:17). Thus, the church needs plural or shared pastoral leadership in each congregation. "The head of the church is Jesus, never a human pastor" (1985, 113).

Summarizing Snyder's principles of the Kingdom would read as follows: (a) An unconditional faith in Jesus Christ and his commands as revealed in Scripture. The church is an open system, and the world affects the church. Careful discernment is

necessary to avoid any allegiance to political, economic, social, and cultural systems. Thus, prayer enables the church constantly to keep the Kingdom in God's hands; (b) the decision making must be Spirit-guided consensus in the church and in the home as a witness of mutual submission to Christ; (c) the priesthood of all believers requires the need for equipping believers (men and women of all ethnicities, age, and social background) for mission according to their gifts given by the Spirit; and (d) believers not only need to engage the world in mission but also engage in their Christian communities in structures for mutual care, worship, accountability, and spiritual growth (Snyder 1985, 111-119).

The Kingdom of God is not an institution, place, or an exclusive eschatological reality. Kingdom has to do with the rule of Christ upon all creation. Kingdom theology is the reflection and praxis of the person of Jesus (the King), and thus the message of the church, to announce the victory of Christ over death and sin, and His coming to bring salvation as new creation or *Shalom*. This is what the creator God from the beginning is trying to restore upon all creation, as things were in the beginning of time. God wants to set things right, with justice, righteousness, and wholeness on every person, society, and rest of creation.

The Kingdom is not the only unifying theme in the Scripture, but it is one that provides a good key thread throughout the Scripture, and one that involves the church as the people of God. Howard Snyder develops seven Old Testament themes that shed light on God's kingdom. These themes work as images to better understand the role of the church in God's kingdom without confusing the two. The themes that Snyder developed are "peace, land, house, city, justice, Sabbath, and Jubilee" (1985, 18). For purposes of

this dissertation the themes of house, and the city, work fine with inclusion and hospitality.

The House of God

From the Old Testament to the New Testament this theme develops following the topics of the tabernacle, the temple, and the house of God. The key idea of this theme is God dwelling among his pilgrim people on earth. “Jesus forms a new family, the church, to be his living house and temple on earth (2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 2:5)” (1985, 39). In Christ Jesus, the whole building is joined, an inclusive building where peoples from different ethnicities are welcomed. “This is the church, God’s special household, created as sign and agent of shalom in our whole earth home” (1985, 39). God’s plan (*oikonomia*) is for God’s house to become agents of reconciliation to bring all creation back to God’s original plan. Thus, the church becomes the visible household where God reigns now, a microcosmos of the Kingdom in the world. This image calls the church to cultivate a sense of being the family (*oikos*) of God, for God’s *oikonomia* for evangelism, justice, and inclusion.

City of the King

Cities are places where diversity, injustice, and power intermingle. “God ‘has prepared a city’ for his faithful people (Hebrews. 11). . . . The city of God is the Kingdom of God” (1985, 46, 47). The city is a place for inclusion, to seek reconciliation, to prophetically faced injustice, a place for God’s people to do mission. Thus, the church is not only a sign but also the agent of God’s Kingdom in the world.

From these two images, we can conclude that

if the church as a literal, space-time community is really the body—the embodiment, the infleshment—of Jesus Christ, it is not too much to say that the church, headed by Christ and animated by the Spirit, is the agent of the kingdom on earth in the present order (though not the sole agent; God also works outside and beyond the church). The church is the primary point of entry of the new order of the kingdom into present history. (1985, 81)

This Kingdom message entailed the restoration of the whole creation. God wants to include, what once was excluded because of sin. The first century believers, within their Mediterranean culture, expressed such restoration, with an image of feasting. God and God’s guests, face-to-face, having a reconciling meal together. These believers practiced welcoming strangers to the table fellowship.

Thus, hospitality (through table fellowship) became the missionary strategy in Luke-Acts. In their theologizing, the disciples went into the world, beyond their cultural and social boundaries to enter the houses, bring salvation to households, and stay for table fellowship. Once a Christian community was established, Jesus becomes the Lord of the household, and the church was to provide table fellowship to welcome “the other” as God’s guests. A community centered in Christ, was supposed to be centered in receiving the stranger.

Moreover, assimilation or inclusion must include this table-fellowship attitude. This is Kingdom hospitality. A hospitality that seeks to introduce the grace of Christ to the world, becoming witnesses of the church’s Kingdom of God.⁴³ Thus, it is not about just assimilating visitors to becoming church members.⁴⁴ Even more, the community must “yearn” to welcome strangers, the outcasts, the other, into the Kingdom to experience restoration. Then, church membership, within the Kingdom, would grow.

Kingdom churches should not approach society with a bullhorn, but rather engaging it up close and personally in conversation. Hospitality is about welcoming, but the church has to go out of its real state to invite the world in. This is where hospitality and assimilation go hand-in-hand. Thus, the once guests, may become members of the Kingdom within the church.⁴⁵

Kingdom Hospitality, and the Growth of the Church

As follows, three theologies are going to be briefly presented in order to understand the growth of the church within a context of mission. First, McGavran's "search theology" will be presented. He also called this "non-growth theology, which is that theological perspective that shows disinterest and even antagonism to the idea of the numerical growth of the church. Second, McGavran's notion of "harvest theology" will be critiqued. This is the theology of the Church Growth movement that emphasizes the results obtained, which in fact produces numerical growth as the main goal of the church. Lastly, we will examine "yearning theology," a perspective that seeks to synthesize both previous theological perspectives.⁴⁶ This theology was developed by Charles Van Engen, professor of biblical theology of mission at Fuller Seminary.

Search Theology

Search Theology is not a school of theology or a movement, but is a way for McGavran to explain the church's tendency to adopt an anti-Church Growth theology. Search Theology came out of four historical factors, according to McGavran: 1) The indifference of protestant missions (even hostility) toward world evangelization, as well as toward the growth of the church in their own countries. 2) Cultural and religious

relativity which encourages a cooperative relationship with other religions in a cordial spirit of live and let live, and thus dampens any effort at conversion. 3) The gap between rich countries and poor countries, and the temptation of the missionary to focus on “good things to do” (i.e., hospitals, schools, agricultural help, relief) but nothing to do with evangelism. 4) The fact of little or no numerical growth in the mission field. This, because those who defend search theology believes that counting new converts is not necessary.

This theology, according to McGavran, refuses to find the lost, and it is not interested in producing converts because it is focused on social service. This pleases God but it must never replace the main reason of being for the church, which is, finding the lost. McGavran even said, “I cannot ally myself on this point with those who put social action first. On the contrary, my conviction is that the salvation granted to those who believe on Jesus Christ is still the supreme need of human beings, and all other human good flows from that prior reconciliation to God” (1990, 33).

This dualism⁴⁷ (social service vis-à-vis evangelism), however, is a weakness in his theology, due to his pragmatic overemphasis on persuading (not just proclaiming) all people with the gospel, so the church may grow.⁴⁸ For McGavran, however, when the populations are not responsive, that is they are resistant to the gospel, then search theology is the only option (1990, 40, 44, 47, 48).

Harvest Theology

Church Growth theology is based mostly on the harvest parables, there the reason of the name for this theology. For Van Engen, harvest theology is

actually more a mark of the receptivity of the particular culture than it is of the nature of the Church. . . . the mark is Catholicity as a whole, not numbers alone . .

. Harvest theology's perspective is an introverted one, for it looks only at the Church itself to see if it is 'harvesting', 'finding', 'growing'. It does not look outward to the world to see if the Church is fulfilling its whole mission in the whole world. . . . The Church is sent into the world as the Body of Christ; and its abilities, gifts and tasks are much broader in scope than producing Church Growth. This is so because the Kingdom of God is much bigger than just adding bodies to the membership roles. The Reign of God is much larger than the decision of individuals and groups to accept Christ as Saviour. It is for this reason that the Church cannot forget the world or reduce the world simply to a closet of bodies ready-made for Church membership. (1994, 380, 381, 387, 388)

Harvest Theology lies in the missional nature and purpose that "God finds," likewise the church must find (not just search) the lost. This idea implies, for McGavran, that God wants results, like converts, and converts can be counted. There the reason for the statement of McGavran when said: "God's will is for the church to grow."

'Harvest Theology,' with its obsession on RESULTS obscures this essential element in the nature of the Church. For in 'Harvest Theology' what is of primary importance is the number of bodies entering the CHURCH. But the pneumatological aspect of the Church as the 'Creatio Dei' reminds us that what we ought to be most interested in is the work of the Spirit which gives new birth to the individual and new life to the Church. . . . If numerical extension is in some way related to the nature of the Church, it must be related to the work and power of the Spirit. (Van Engen 1994, 392)

An interesting theological aspect in harvest theology is that there seems to be an equation between the work of the church and the work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who convinces the unconverted of sin. It is the Spirit who brings all peoples to Christ through the growth of the church. *Missio Dei* is God's activity, as the one who saves, and sends the Spirit (and also who sends the church). The tasks of the church and the task of God, however, should not be confused.⁴⁹ The church should not forget that it is God's people sent on a mission, God's mission to the world.

"Yearning" for the Growth of the Church

The ideas presented by “search theology” and “harvest theology” are helpful in understanding the growth of the church, but they represent two extremes that should be avoided. The concept of “yearning for numerical growth” brings a more balanced approach. Van Engen states that “ ‘yearning for Numerical Growth’ is an attitude on the part of the Church concerning herself, her place in the mission of God and her role in the world” (1981, 395). This concept brings a balance to the extremes of either the complete rejection of seeking numerical growth (“search theology”) or a focus only on counting conversions (“harvest theology”). Van Engen proposes that this attitude of “yearning” for growth

points to whether the members of the Body individually and collectively are utilizing their gifts with and for the same purposes as those of its Head whose will it is “that none should perish, but that ALL should come to repentance” (II Pet. 3:9 KJV). This Church is the Church which desires that ALL MEN [sic] be saved. . . . This is the Church which exhibits a burning desire, a yearning, to bring the “ethne” into the Kingdom. (1981, 366)

This attitude of “yearning” recognizes the importance of numerical growth but places the emphasis on the church’s role in participating in its apostolic calling. The focus is not on the amount of growth, but, rather, on the idea that the church should “yearn” for growth because God yearns for all to come to Christ. Van Engen describes this by stating that

YEARNING for numerical growth is a true mark of the Church, while the actual AMOUNT of numerical growth is a matter of historical, sociological, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural factors and does NOT point to the trueness of the Church. . . . The AMOUNT of growth is a fruit and by-product of the work of the Spirit in the world and through the Body—a fruit for which the Body earnestly prays, seeks laborers, plants, waters, cultivates, harvests, and rejoices—but a fruit which may or may not be plentiful, in fact, may or may not be there at all. (1981, 366, 367)

Van Engen's concept of "yearning" contains four distinctive marks. First, yearning for numerical growth is a matter of faith. Second, it is a matter of critical testing for it calls into question the Church's outward-directedness. Third, this yearning does not aim at numerical growth as a goal, but "tests the very catholicity of the church." Fourth, yearning for numerical growth is a matter of being a witness to the world. "This is not a Church closed to the World, separated from the world, speaking against the world. This is a Church which with wide-open arms is waiting to receive any and all" (1994, 366).

In this "yearning" for the church to grow, the body of Christ goes into the world with God's mission. It is the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom, in word and deed by the church in the world. It illustrates the obedience of the body of Christ in mission, to bring people into the church. These people may come by transfer and biological growth, but to affect the world, the church must "yearn" to grow by conversion, the most effective way to be a witness in the world. The church, showing Kingdom hospitality, shows a way to express its "yearning" for humans to reconcile with God.

Finally, Orlando Costas in his article "Dimensiones del Crecimiento Integral de la Iglesia" (Dimensions of the Integral Growth of the Church) states that the growth of the church is a multidimensional process. The intention of Costas was to react against the Church Growth movement's emphasis on numeric growth as their main focus of the mission of God. Thus, Costas uses an integral missional perspective to explain what the growth of the church should look like. "If the church is a dynamic and complex reality,

and if it grows as a divine creation and community of faith, then it is necessary to have an integral theory about its growth” (Costas 1992, 116, translation mine).

Costas proposed a model for integral growth that includes four dimensions of growth that come out of the life and mission of the community of faith. It is necessary for all of these dimensions to be integrated in order to have healthy growth of a church in mission. First, the numeric dimension refers to non-believers reconciling with Christ through the church. Second, the organic dimension has to do with cultural issues related to how the church identifies itself with its historical and social reality; this includes issues such as contextualization, communion, celebration, and stewardship. Third, the conceptual dimension describes the logical and the psycho-social areas of life, explaining how the church thinks critically about its faith and its image in mission and its immediate world. Fourth, the diaconal dimension is about the ethical aspects of the church and its missional service facing the structural challenges in society.

It can be said that the church *grows integrally* when it receives new members, expands internally, deepens its knowledge of the faith, and serves the world. But it *grows qualitatively* when it reflects spirituality, incarnation, and fidelity in each dimension. Numeric growth in and of itself becomes obesity; organic [growth] becomes bureaucracy; conceptual [growth] becomes a theoretical abstraction; and diaconal [growth] becomes social activism. And all four dimensions lack theological integrity if they are not motivated by and saturated with the presence of the Spirit, if they do not come from an effective incarnation of the body of Christ in the sorrows and pains of humanity, and if they are not faithful to the plans and action of God in history of the world in general and of God’s people in particular. Only by integrating these dimensions and correlating them with the above mentioned qualities can we talk about normal and, therefore, healthy growth for the church and its mission in the world. (Costas 1992, 121, translation mine)

Thus, the numerical growth of the church is not the most important sign of the presence of the Kingdom because the kingdom cannot be reduced simply to numerical growth. The growth of the church is an important element in the mission of God but not

the most essential. Counting converts and church visitors are ways to measure the impact of the church in mission in the world. That is why, according to Van Engen, the church should yearn for growth, and for Costas the church should seek for integral growth.

In summary, a Kingdom theology may provide content and purpose for the assimilation, evangelization, and discipleship activities that bring growth to the church, while Church Growth reflections provide strategic possibilities for helping the church to grow. The challenge, however, is for those strategies to be theologically grounded, and for Kingdom theology to be practical and strategic for the local church.

Conclusion

First, Christianity in Costa Rica continues to be affected by a global influence, even more in today's digital world. Colonialism brought the Roman Catholic Church to Costa Rica, and neocolonialism brought the many expressions of the evangelical church. While the evangelical church has never occupied a prominent place in Costa Rican society, the Roman Catholic Church is now losing its prominence. In other words, the Christian church in Costa Rica is losing its place as one of the pillars in society. In other words, the Latin American church is dealing with issues related to both postmodernity and postcolonialism, while still functioning from within primarily modern and colonial structures.

Evangelical churches in Costa Rica have been shown to be good examples of denominational franchises (including neopentecostalism). In most cases, they have followed models of churches designed from and for a different society. These church models were imported into a country that has evolved, but the churches have not contextualized their models. For instance, in the current information age, younger

generations are not finding Christianity appealing perhaps because it does not seem authentic, yet they have admitted to a belief in God.

Second, the “church” has a dual nature as a human institution and the divine body of Christ. As such, on the one hand, the theoretical body of organizational and language theories; social interactionism; and religious, sociological, and Church Growth studies helps to explain how a newcomer is assimilated into a religious group. This gives a perspective on the church as a human institution. On the other hand, biblical and theological studies help to understand the divine nature of the church, in showing the importance of Kingdom theology; that the Kingdom is larger than the church; and that the mission of God has a church, rather than the other way around.

Kingdom theology provides to any local church a larger metanarrative of thousands of years where the triune God has been calling His people (e.g., once outsiders, now insiders) to become a redeeming force in a world where all things are being claimed by God, to be set right as they once were before the Fall. Now the church finds its calling and its vocation, which is to be hospitable.

Third, when Christians welcome strangers (as guests not as visitors) into the church, they are offering them a space that has meaning and is valuable to those who belong. This sacred space is safe, personal, friendly and comfortable. According to Pohl, the church that welcomes strangers needs to get involved in attentive listening, an opening of the heart of the community, where the community becomes visible for sharing generosity (1999, 13). Church members should not find themselves “holier” than their visitors; they should see them as another pilgrim looking for grace and should welcome the pilgrim in a place that God has created for such seekers. Visitors are looking for a

place to belong, a place to worship, and where God may help to solve their problems.

“People are hungry for welcome but most Christians have lost track of the heritage of hospitality” (Pohl 1999, 8).

Fourth, many Costa Ricans seem to hold to the idea that strangers may not be bearers of “good gifts.” In the midst of urban busyness, hostility and insecurity, indigents using drugs, and urban myths about violent immigrants and the abusive poor, churches face a huge challenge in order to welcome the stranger and assimilate him or her into their communities. Thus, one needs to recognize that hospitality has its risks (Pohl 1999, 86, 138, 141). A community can be transformed when it opens itself to welcome new people. However, there must be a balance between receptivity and confrontation. Hospitality is an effective way to work with these controversial issues in the church (Hershberger 1999, 169).

God’s plan is to restore all fallen creation and reconcile all to God, providing shalom through Jesus. The church must facilitate that reconciling encounter between God and those who need to experience the reconciling presence of Christ, and one way to do this is through welcoming the stranger in their midst. This is the message of the Kingdom, but have been the Costa Rican churches been proclaiming this message?

CHAPTER 2: THE ASSIMILATION CHALLENGES OF THE CHURCH IN COSTA RICA

This chapter presents the socio-cultural context of the study site, explaining the founding and missionization of Costa Rica, and its capital city, San José. It also presents some highlights regarding the religious culture of the people in San José, and then reviews the current distribution of churches in San José. This chapter intends to highlight those challenges of assimilation/inclusion that faces the evangelical church in Costa Rica.

Christianity came to Costa Rica along with the conquistadors' enterprise. Among these conquistadors were missionaries who were often unaware of the oppression they participated in just by association with the structure of domination in colonialism. Those missionaries belonged mostly to the two main branches of Christianity, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant church, which came to Central America 300 years apart. First, in the 1500s, the Roman Catholic Church arrived in what today is known as Latin America as the ideological force of the Spanish conquistadors. Then, in the 1800s the protestant and evangelical churches came also to Latin America as the ideological force of British and United States capitalism.⁵⁰ After the Spanish-American War of 1898, the influence of Protestantism in Latin America increased even more (Smith 1998, 2). According to some scholars, evangelical missions have been no more than a "religious legitimization" of the cultural, political, and economic influence of the United States in Latin America (Bastian 1986, 178). Others go further, arguing that this legitimization also explains why some evangelical churches have supported "right-wing regimes" in Latin America (Clearly and Steward-Gambino 1992, 14). Evangelical missionaries worked hard at implementing a threefold task: (1) to lead the people to Christ and the Bible, and thus (2) liberate them from the superstitions of the Roman

Catholic Church, (3) “and then (though generally unconsciously on their part) consolidate their efforts by ‘americanizing’ them” (Westmeier 1999, 28). It is not a secret, however, that the Roman Catholic Church, in words and in symbols, has also taken part in the legitimization of the *status quo* (Klaiber 1998, 9).

On the one side, evangelicals have to face a Roman Catholic culture that is much imbedded in the Latin American culture.⁵¹ Most Costa Ricans, even those who are not active participants in the Roman Catholic Church, describe their devotion to “the church” and its traditions with high esteem. On the other side, the Roman Catholic Church faces its own reality of a lack of priests, which affects the quality of the pastoral care and re-evangelization its people receive. As well, they must deal with the growing charismatic movement that claims recognition and pastoral leadership, the large folk-Catholic population with its own syncretistic faith, and the current anti-Vatican II movement that is affecting the desire of some priests and nuns to engage in social movements and serve the poor instead of just serving the church.

All of these factors contribute to a complex situation for the church in Latin America. Therefore, in order to understand what has shaped the present Christian church in Costa Rica, one needs to look at the history of the church in the context of the rest of society. To do this, the historical interpretation is going to be divided into five periods: the Conquest, the Colonial times, the Liberal Republic, the Reformed Republic, and the Neo-liberal Republic.

The Conquest (1502-1569): Assimilation by Force

The first period was the Conquest (1502-1569), a period that was mostly characterized by the work of the Spanish Crown and the Roman-Catholic Church hand in hand. This mutual legitimization helped to consolidate the Kingdoms of *Castilla* and *Aranguez* into what later became the Spanish Crown after over 700 years of fighting against Islam in their own land. During this “holy war,” they learned that proclaiming Christianity was synonymous with accepting the Roman Christian dogmas, such as, the Triune God, the Virgin Mary and one holy Catholic Church. The assimilation method of the Roman Catholic Church missionaries was to proclaim their doctrine. If the natives would accept the doctrine, be baptized, and attend mass regularly, they would be considered Christians. That is, assimilation by imposition. Conversion then was equated with baptism, which was a way to show allegiance and submission to the Spanish crown, the Roman Catholic Church and its dogmas, and the Spanish slave master.

In October of 1492 Columbus discovered “Las Indias,” and a year later Pope Alexander VI gave the Spanish Crown the responsibility and legal facilities to evangelize the new land “and to send to the said islands and to the mainland wise, upright, God-fearing, and virtuous men who will be capable of instructing the indigenous peoples in good morals and in the Catholic faith” (Neill and Chadwick 1986, 121).

On September 18th 1502, on his last trip around the Caribbean Sea, Columbus arrived at what he named Costa Rica, which had a population of about 30,000 natives (Blanco Segura, 1983, 30). “With every expedition for exploration or conquest came priests and friars. The major part of the work was undertaken by Franciscans and Dominicans, with the Jesuits following a little later” (Neill and Chadwick 1986, 144).

While the discovery of new land and wealth for the Spanish Crown was taking place, Northern Europe was facing another challenge when in 1517 Martin Luther launched a new Christian movement in Europe. At this same time, the evangelistic task in Costa Rica was going well, when in 1522 the expedition of Gil Gonzalez around the Pacific area recorded 9,287 converted souls to Christianity (Blanco Segura 1983, 43). With the positive development of the mission in the new lands, the establishment of the organized church was necessary, and therefore in 1531 Costa Rica and Nicaragua formed the diocese of *Leon*. By 1544, the first Christian (Roman Catholic) church was built in the northwest Pacific area of the country in the village of *Nicoya*. “The missionary method followed by all the Orders was the same – the creation of strong Christian villages, in which church, school, hospital, and orphanage all played their part” (Neill and Chadwick 1986, 142).

With this gospel also came with the Spanish sword, when in 1569 the *encomienda* was applied in Costa Rica. The Spanish Crown entrusted the natives to be evangelized by the colonial Spaniards. The *encomienda* was a type of feudal system where natives became slaves of Spaniards. This system was devastating for the natives because according to Nelson,

it has been calculated that there were 27,000 Indians in Costa Rica at the time of the discovery in 1502 [by] 1741 it had been reduced to 9,000. The national census of 1950 revealed that there remain in Costa Rica only 2,692 Indians, only one third of one percent of the total population. It is doubtful that any other country in Latin America has such a low percentage. (Nelson 1963, 6-7)

The same year, 1569, the Inquisition was established in Spain and later on in the new colonies. In response to Protestantism, this penal system made it impossible for any non-Roman Catholic religious expression of Christianity to be practiced in any Spanish

territory. In other words, becoming a Christian was to be forced to be assimilated as Spaniard and a Roman Catholic. Joining a church involved no sense of inclusion unless one agreed to change identities.

The Colonial Times (1569-1821): Cultural Assimilation (To Be a Costa Rican is to Be a Roman Catholic)

The second period was the Colonial Times, in which, by the end of the sixteenth century, Costa Rica was considered “Christian” (Blanco Segura 1967, 106). However, the poverty of the Costa Rican colony (lack of mineral wealth), with few natives to be exploited, insulated this colony from the supervision and care of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, the folk expressions of Spanish Catholicism that came with the conquistadors were reinforced and slightly transformed through time. As a result of this, several generations of undisciplined folk Catholic Christians grew up during the colonial times, and even today, folk Catholic expressions of Christianity are common in Costa Rica. For instance, the most significant religious phenomenon that has shaped the folk Catholic identity in Costa Rica took place in 1635 when a native woman miraculously found an image of *Maria nuestra Señora de Los Angeles* (Mary Our Lady of the Angels). On that site, later on, the most important Roman Catholic Church in Costa Rica was built in honor of the Patroness of Costa Rica. Currently, over two million people (almost half of the population of the country) go on a pilgrimage, according to the tradition, to visit Mary Our Lady of the Angels, to give thanks or ask for a miracle.

In order to illustrate the religiosity of the Costa Ricans, an anecdote from 1711 tells that the Bishop Benito Garret sentenced Costa Ricans to a possibility of excommunication unless provisions were made for religious services in the rural regions.

Bishop Garret also wrote an urgent letter to the King of Spain explaining the abuse Catholic priests were committing on the aborigines, treating them as slaves (Blanco-Segura 1983, 174). These abuses continued when in 1748 the Monsignor Marin of the diocese of *Leon* (Nicaragua), from which Costa Rican Catholics were supervised, ordered the priests in Costa Rica to burn down the houses of those who lived far from the church. It was the policy of the Church to oblige people to settle in or near villages where the chapels were and thus be able to fulfill their religious duties (Blanco Segura 1983, 194). This policy of forced migration was applied through 1755. Monsignor Tristan in 1784 describes “the indecency” of the churches in Costa Rica because of their deterioration (Blanco Segura 1983, 208). This lack of pastoral care, isolation, and deterioration of the church buildings produced a religious apathy and resistance, characteristic of the religious life of the Costa Ricans of that time.

From 1569 to 1750, Costa Rican economic life was controlled by the *encomienda* (slavery). After 1750, a self-subsistence type of farming became the model until the boom of coffee. Capitalism came as a new way of exchanging goods and services after 1840 with the exportation of coffee to the international market, by means of English Europeans (Protestant) traders (Molina Jimenez 1991, 73-75). In other words, becoming a Christian was joining from birth (with no other choice) a Roman Catholic Spanish Church.

The Liberal Republic (1821-1948): Cultural (Global) Assimilation (To Be a Rich Costa Rican is to Become European)

Two important international events influenced the third period known as the Liberal Republic (1821-1948). First, in 1775 the 13 colonies in North America declared

their independence from the British Crown. Second, about the time of that first event, the French revolution was taking place. Soon, voices in Latin America were claiming independence just when Spain was facing the pressures of Napoleon in Europe and decided to give up some of its colonies. Central America, without fighting, gained their independence from Spain in 1821, and became Liberal Republics, thus leading to our third period in the history of Costa Rica.

According to Perez Brignoli there were fifty thousand inhabitants in Costa Rica during the early 1800s (1997, 3). On the one hand, there were poor families whose ambition was to conquer the mountain, moving thus into a new frontier (Perez Brignoli 1997, 4). On the other hand, there was the aristocracy of the Spanish families whose children born in the New World had the opportunity to go and study in Europe. In the latter group, the influence of Protestantism and Liberalism awakened their minds to developing a new society in Costa Rica: a secular State. The boom of the production of coffee and its sale to London's trading market opened the opportunity for a new aristocracy and the coming of non-Roman Catholic Europeans. However, these Europeans had a business mind, and were not interested in sharing the gospel. Because of this, Protestants had the perfect opportunity to develop a non-Roman Catholic faith among the new aristocracy in Costa Rica, but it did not happen.

By the end of the nineteenth century, evangelical missions came to the country with an anti-Roman Catholic approach that emphasized even more the prejudices that Protestants already had against the Roman Catholic Church. These missionaries, however, could not comprehend that insulting the Roman Catholic Church implied a

rejection of the Costa Rican identity. “Costa Ricans felt Roman Catholicism was as much a part of their culture as rice and beans were of their diet” (Nelson 1963, 86).

These missionaries also did not approach respectfully the spirituality of the folk Catholics. As a result, even today, there are no sources (that the researcher knows of) that document any massive conversion of new Christians. According to Nelson “the nineteenth century was almost entirely non-missionary and much of it even non-evangelical” (Nelson 1963, 84). Let us now consider some of the main characteristics of this century. Between 1822 and 1840, the first English and German immigrants came as the first Protestant people living among the Costa Ricans. Their church was established not as centers where the public could come hear the Gospel and be converted, but rather as private houses of worship for non-Roman Catholic foreigners (Nelson 1963, 85).

There were some Protestants who opposed the... attempt to ‘proselytize’ the Roman Catholics... [they] believed that the church of Rome was a legitimate church and that proselytizing, therefore, was uncalled for and even impertinent. (Nelson 1963, 85)

They had come to Costa Rica solely for material reasons. Religion was very much a secondary or tertiary matter to them (Nelson 1963, 85).

This period began with the Federation of the Provinces of Central America gaining their independence from Spain on September 15th, 1821. Costa Rica was a province of this Federation. In their article on religion, the Federation named the Roman Catholic Church as the one and only true faith with the exclusion of any other faith (Blanco Segura 1983, 285-286). In 1838, Costa Rica proclaimed separation from the Federation and became a sovereign nation, however, their constitution kept that same article of faith that exist until this day.

In 1843, an interesting figure named William Le Lacheur appeared in Costa Rica. This English Captain shipped Costa Rican coffee to London for the first time. He also took the first Costa Ricans to London and placed them in schools, as well as gave away the first Bibles among the intellectual class in Costa Rica. The liberal bourgeois class was born around the exportation of coffee. For instance, in 1897 the British controlled 50% of the coffee that was produced in and exported from Costa Rica (Quesada Monge 1991, 47).

The influence of Europeans in Latin America worried the United States. “In 1823 President Monroe defined his Doctrine, summarized as ‘America for the Americans’” (Migues Bonino 1997, 6). This Doctrine was revived by the “Manifest Destiny” during the annexation of Texas, leaning toward an interpretation of America for the United States, not America for the various Americans (Costa Ricans, Venezuelans, Argentines, etc) here.

The people of the United States believed that they had developed a new and better society and that God had singled them out to spread the benefits of republicanism and economic opportunity to undeveloped or more backward areas. Thus, the U.S. expansionism was not simply a variant of European imperialism; rather, it enjoyed divine sanction because it involved extending the geographical area of freedom. (Coerver and Hall 1999, 18)

As an early expression of neocolonialism, American Protestantism and business became further entangled when in 1889 the United Fruit Company, a U.S.A Corporation led by Protestants began operations in the Costa Rican Caribbean area. This led to other Protestant churches being started in Costa Rica in the 1890s when the black population

from Jamaica came to work in the construction of the railroad. Among these Protestant churches came the Baptist Jamaican Church (1888), followed by the British Methodists (1894), and the Anglicans (1896). All of these denominational churches were located in the Caribbean area of the country and arrived as part of the religious culture of the black population, who built the second railroad in the country at the initiative of a United States businessman, Minor Keith, for the exportation of bananas (the United Fruit Company) (Piedra 1984, 20). Keith came to replace the British investors and continued the construction of the railroad to the Caribbean Sea. In 1886, Keith took over the payments of the British loans, and the Costa Rican government considering such favor, gave him 8% of the Costa Rican territory, so Keith could developed his business of plantation and exportation of bananas (Quesada Monge 1991, 62). These events showed the beginning of the U.S. American dominance in the economic and religious life in Costa Rica, above the Europeans.

On the other hand, the late nineteenth century also brought “faith” missions like the Central American Mission, and Latin American Mission.

The ‘faith’ missionaries were motivated by a vivid picture of hell. For them, the purpose of missions was to save lost souls from the eternal torment of hellfire and brimstone.... While faith missionaries have not been oblivious to the physical and social needs of the people to whom they minister, and have thus been active in medical and educational ministries, evangelism has always been paramount.... Most of the innovations in the twentieth-century missions have been introduced by faith missions ... including radio, aviation, Bible correspondence courses, gospel recordings, tapes, cassettes, saturation of evangelism, and theological education by extension. (Tucker 1983, 290)

The first United States faith mission agency began operating in Costa Rica in 1890. It was called the Central American Mission and was supported by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield and a group of businessmen from Texas. With this group, premillennialism and

theological fundamentalism came to Costa Rica (Miguez Bonino 1997, 36-37).

According to Tucker,

...Scofield was determined to right that wrong: 'Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria – that Central America is the nearest unoccupied field to any Christian in the United States or Canada.... Then in the summer of 1888 he learned specifically of the needs of the people in Costa Rica, who were devoid of religion, except for the 'dissolute priests making a mockery of ministering to the people spiritually'. (Tucker 1983, 305)

By 1894 seven of Scofield's missionaries were sent to Costa Rica (Tucker 1983, 305). The Central American Mission was the first non-Roman Catholic Christian group who sold Bibles among the Costa Ricans. Their work was mainly evangelistic, and by 1900, they reported 190 baptized Protestant believers. By then, during the early 1900s the Costa Rican population reached 280,000 inhabitants, and 81% of the population was registered as rural (Perez Brignoli 1997, 3, 5).

The second mission organization that came to Costa Rica in 1917 was the Methodist Episcopal Church. This was done after the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910,⁵² which inspired the development of the first Latin American Protestant-Ecumenical Congress in Panama in 1916. As a result of this congress, different U.S. evangelical denominations divided up the region of Latin America among themselves to carry on their evangelistic and missionary work as a geographic strategy.

The last Project of the historic denominations was the geo-strategic missionary effort of the Panama Protestant congress of 1916 (Miguez Bonino 1997, 6). If one raises a conspiracy theory question of why this congress took place in Panama, and not another country in Latin America, the answer may have geopolitical and religious implications of the Monroe Doctrine. Panama was the newest country in Latin America and the cross-routes of commercial importance because of its newly built canal by the United States. If

Panama was the geo-political creation of the United States, was the Panama Congress of 1916 an expression of ideological and religious Panamericanism? The Methodist church was selected to work in Costa Rica.

This era is characterized in its beginning by “specialized” mission agencies and a non-geographic strategy based on people groups. A good illustration of this specialization of mission agencies was the organization of the third evangelical missionary organization: the Latin American Mission (L.A.M.) in 1921. This mission developed a larger impact on the country than the other two previous missions. Harry and Susan Strachan, faith missionaries, led L.A.M. This mission was broad in its specialization of ministries, opening a Bible institute (1926), a clinic (1929), an orphanage (1932), a publishing house that produced evangelical books (1945), and an organization for relief work (1962). All these institutions were very innovative and important during those years of specialization in missions.⁵³

During the 1940s with the help of other missionaries L.A.M. opened the first evangelical radio station. L.A.M. also built a church in 1929 in downtown San José, the capital of Costa Rica. In 1927, the second evangelistic campaign in San Jose organized by L.A.M. provoked the greatest religious controversy since the days of anticlericalism (liberalism) in the late nineteenth century. These campaigns created a great popular revolt and were even covered by the liberal press. The missionaries again did not realize that in Costa Rica insulting Roman Catholicism is paramount to insulting the culture itself.⁵⁴

This period in Costa Rican history was characterized by a British and American capitalistic neocolonial agenda with a religious faith. Progress and liberty implied an Enlightenment worldview of freeing Costa Ricans from the medieval Roman Catholic

Church into a higher level of cultural development that Protestantism could provide. Despite these anti-Roman Catholic political efforts among the Liberal Costa Rican politicians, for most Costa Ricans being Roman Catholic was deeply embedded in their culture. Very naively, faith missions ignored this deeply acculturated reality of being Costa Rican and Roman Catholic, and their imported strategic and specialized mission efforts were often not very successful producing the long-term results. One positive aspect to highlight of the work of the faith missions, like L.A.M, was the creation of social institutions that created a positive impact to alleviate the suffering among the poorest of the poor.

Theologically speaking, most of these fundamentalist groups who came by the end of the nineteenth century presented a strong modernist agenda with a high degree of individualism, presenting salvation as a matter of individual decision with a subjective experience of holiness as a second blessing⁵⁵ (against the Roman Catholic idea of the church as a medium of salvation). Another characteristic is the idea that the church is living in the era of the Spirit (a new dispensation with a predominant premillennialism, and fundamentalism⁵⁶). Another highlight was, or in some cases still is, urban mass evangelism mostly based on charismatic leaders as a preferred strategy of evangelism. Finally, these groups often had the characteristic of a positive perspective on the moral improvement of society coming from a change in the human heart, with an emphasis on charity, mutual aid, and social mobility, but lacking any structural and political perspective to explain the evils of society.

Toward the end of this period and to the beginning of the next, more missions began to arrive in Costa Rica, such as Pentecostal groups who already had 50 years of

presence in South America. Their dynamism and impact will be discussed in the next section.

***The Reformed Republic (1949-1980): To Be an Evangelical Christian is to
Become American***

This fourth period of the Reformed Republic (1949-1980) marked the beginning of State intervention in economic and social matters. The government took possession of all banks, developed industry, and expanded public education and health programs. Evangelicals had another opportunity to develop their interpretation of Christianity among the new born high class in Costa Rica after the revolution of 1948, a time of re-structuration.

Evangelical churches continued to be silent about social issues because their concern was only to save souls from the Roman Catholic "apostasy." On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church had made sporadic attempts to express their social concerns, but nothing long lasting or far-reaching in impact.

In 1949, the Revolutionary government won the war, preserved and expanded the social securities, and implemented other reforms where the government held a monopoly of the economy. Roman Catholicism was preserved as the religion of the State. During this era (after World War II and starting the cold war), evangelical denominations invaded Costa Rica. For instance, several Baptist denominations and many Pentecostal churches appeared in the country. Among those, the most important were the Assemblies of God in 1942 and the Church of God in 1950, which over time increased in size beyond all other evangelical churches.

In the 1960s, R. Kenneth Strachan (the son of Harry and Susan Strachan) developed an evangelistic approach to mobilize the laity in Latin America. This approach is called *Evangelism-in-Depth* (a complex saving souls method). During this decade, the first boom of the evangelical church in Costa Rica took place, and by the mid 1970s, the Pentecostal growth of the church was even higher (charismatic movement). Its friendly liturgy and ecclesiology attracted people and provided answers to the existential problems of lower classes. Conflicts between traditional evangelical churches and Pentecostal churches became notorious because of doctrinal issues.

Evangelical denominations were not the only ones to experience some type of revival. In 1972, Priest Francisco McNutt and Maria Arias developed prayer meetings with a charismatic tone. The charismatic Roman Catholic movement began to grow through prayer meetings and Bible studies. By 1976, the Catholic Church recognized the movement, avoiding the word “charismatic” and calling it “Spiritual Renewal.” The movement would be recognized only if they submitted to the Church's dogmas, and they did.

The late 1970s marked the highest growth of non-Catholic churches in Costa Rica. By this time, evangelical churches began to express their concern and differentiate themselves from the neopentecostals. These years marked not only the separation within the Christian church among the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant church and the evangelical church, but also between the evangelical Church, Protestant church and the Pentecostal church.

American Pentecostalism has come to Latin American in three waves (Escobar, 2002, 78-79). The first wave came with a relative high church (classic Pentecostalism),

but not as high in structure and rituals as the historical Protestant churches. The second wave (Charismatic movement) and the third wave (neopentecostalism) were very much accepted by the low-church and folk Latin American Pentecostalism already indigenized. The disenfranchised and poor social classes in Latin America found in Pentecostalism an answer to their anomy in society; but today one can find middle and middle high classes attending neopentecostal churches of the third wave that preach the prosperity gospel.⁵⁷ What once was the church for and of the poor, now seems to be the church for middle class Costa Ricans.

The growth of these neopentecostal churches during this epoch has been amazing. Sadly, there are some negative aspects that one needs to mention in the next period. It is true, nevertheless, that the Pentecostal movement is one, but it has generated many currents, some more progressive than others. In a few groups, the gifts of the Spirit have empowered the laity to develop new ministries and impact society in positive ways, like participating in social protests and raising prophetic voices while participating in politics, and becoming gender inclusive. Most groups, yet, preach the prosperity gospel (under a neoapostolic structure) a syncretistic theology from some neo-fundamentalist groups in the United States.

During the 1980s, the United States of America pressured Central American countries to support its efforts against communism in Nicaragua. For instance, Costa Rica, bastion of democracy in the region, received a total of about \$1.4 billion, with only a fraction for military aid.⁵⁸ With this military and financial aid also came extreme right churches (in the political sense) from the U.S.A, sending evangelists and missionaries with the purpose of ideologically opposing the spread of communism in

Central America. Their interest was not to spread a holistic gospel capable of influencing the creation of the Kingdom of God, but rather to further their neocolonial political agenda.

The Neo-Liberal Republic (1981-present): Evangelicals Looking for Identity

The Neo-Liberal Republic took place after the oil crisis finally affected the Costa Rican economy in 1981. The profits of the increased price of oil during the 1970s (Petrodollars) by first world countries, were sent to the international financial system through private banks and were lent to Latin American governments. The international recession in 1980 and the new U.S. economic policies in 1981 reduced the demand of products from Latin American exports and increased the international interest rates. Latin American countries were forced to pay the old loans, and new loans came with high interest rates (Coerver and Hall 1999, 173-174).

The U.S. influence in Latin America persisted even in the religious-missionary milieu. Escobar mentions that 50% of all Roman Catholics are in Latin America and almost half of the Roman Catholic missionary force in Latin American comes from the United States; and on the Protestant side 26.5 percent of all U.S. missionaries come to Latin America (2002, 23).

Despite all this professional theological and missiological “help” from the north, the evangelical churches continued to be theologically incapable of explaining the structural phenomenon that is producing more poverty among the Costa Ricans. Some Pentecostal churches have explained the different economic and political crises as a sign that Christ is coming soon. The dualistic and individualistic theology of much of the Christian church in Costa Rica, however, was only concerned with saving souls, and as

such was not capable of addressing these social issues.⁵⁹ Many evangelical churches continue reproducing imported theologies and have missed another opportunity to affect the country. An interpretation of theology of the Kingdom of God was only present in some liberation theologians who interpreted the crisis from a Marxist perspective.

On another order of things, the decade of the 1990s saw a boom of tourism, and short-term mission trips in Costa Rica. There was also a boom among independent neopentecostal churches under a new authoritarian apostolic movement preaching a prosperity theology. A large number of evangelicals now believe they can trade with God money for blessings, using magical rituals and fetish objects to obtain blessings. Costa Ricans, despite the legacy and continuation of a large missionary presence in Costa Rica,⁶⁰ local churches were not yet capable of responding theologically to the challenges of their cultural context, nor were they training indigenous leaders. As well, the production of new local theologies by some para-church organizations was reduced to concerts and some sporadic youth Christian movements crossing Christian ecumenical boundaries. Overall a second and third generation of Protestant and evangelical Christians were becoming financially wealthy, but further away from the reality and the needs of the country, and with no historical identity of their religious and cultural background.

The decade of the 1990s and even the first years of the new millennium have brought a huge concern for evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Costa Rica. Therefore, in the remaining paragraphs of this paper will be discussed as those challenges Costa Rican Christians face in their efforts to continue sharing the good news. Let us begin with the problem of church desertion.

Several studies have shown a decrease and even desertion among evangelical churches in terms of membership. Jorge Gómez categorized the evangelical, Protestant, and Pentecostal movement in the following way:

There were 20 denominations with a Pentecostal background founded by and still linked to U.S. missionaries representing 40.8% among evangelical, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches in Costa Rica. Fifty-seven denominations were classified as indigenous Pentecostals (not dependent upon any foreign group), representing 25.8%. Nineteen denominations were grouped in the category of historical-traditional dependent (evangelical and Protestant churches that are still dependent or are linked to denominations mainly from the United States) which make up 12.2%. Twenty-three denominations were classified as historical-traditional independent (evangelical and Protestant churches that are no longer linked to foreign denominations) and are only 7.2%. Finally, the category of “other” includes nine denominations, such as the Seventh Day Adventist, Salvation Army, and others, representing 7.5% (Gomez 1996, 15-16).

The majority of the growth in all those churches happened from the 1950s until the early 1980s. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the evangelical, Protestant, and Pentecostal movement began showing a decline. An interesting fact is that since 1950 the population of Costa Rica has quadrupled. In 1956, there were one million people, and by 2001, there were four million. Therefore, although the church has grown, it has not keep up with the population growth, as the population keeps growing and the churches now show a decline.

According to Gómez, this decline is because of a trend of church desertion and the lack of an effective process of assimilation, which shows the following interesting

aspects: Approximately one of two people who once were Protestant in some period of their life has abandoned the church. One of five Protestants and one of three Catholics could be considered nominal members (1996, 133, 33). In regards to gender, on the one hand, fewer Costa Rican men have been Protestant, and are among those who desert church the most; On the other hand more women become Protestant than men (1996, 134, 41).

“The highest desertion is given among new converts (1-2 years)” (1996, 80).

After two years of permanency in the church, the probability diminishes greatly. Half of those who desert the Protestant church were born Catholic, and very possibly will return to Roman Catholicism (1996, 134). "The highest probability in desertion takes place during the first six months of conversion, especially among the men" (1996, 135).⁶¹

Protestants have been less effective among the 18-24 year-old population, and of these mainly men (1996, 38). Desertion increases in the 18-24 year-old population and 60 and more (1996, 41) Protestants, however, seem to be more efficient with the population among the 25-59 years⁶².

In addition, recent studies have worried some evangelical leaders in Costa Rica. In November of 2006 the marketing research company SIMER⁶³ did a survey about the church affiliation, participation and religious preferences of Costa Ricans in the greater metropolitan area within the ages of 15-65.⁶⁴ The survey included 965 people who were interviewed in face-to-face home interviews.

According to this survey, eight of ten Costa Ricans recognize having a religious confession, and among those with a religious confession, seven are Roman Catholic and three are evangelicals. The older the person, the greater the tendency to remain Roman

Catholic; the younger the person, there is more of a tendency of becoming evangelical. Nine of ten Roman Catholics have always had that affiliation (the majority of the other ten percent came from the evangelical church). Seven of ten evangelicals were “born into” the evangelical church, meaning they were raised in families that already attended the evangelical church. The remaining three of the ten evangelicals previously attended the Roman Catholic Church. This data would indicate that the evangelical church is growing primarily due to family tradition (biological growth), and the evangelization of Roman Catholics, who were most likely nominal members of the church.

This data indicates that, on the one hand, evangelicals are not being effective evangelizing younger people. On the other hand, there seems to be a real problem within the evangelical church in the area of the evangelization and discipleship of young people who are “born” into the church. This is particularly problematic when one considers that people between the ages of 0 and 29 represent 59 percent of the general population of Costa Rica (INEC, 2002).⁶⁵

In another study, done annually by the School of Mathematics of the Universidad de Costa Rica⁶⁶ through phone interviews throughout the whole country (N:1000), in November, 2007 it was determined that 11.3 % of Costa Ricans claimed to have no religious affiliation, while 13.4% were evangelicals, and 45% were active Roman Catholics. One interesting aspect is that in comparing the years of this study, in 1991 those with no religion were 5.2%, while evangelicals represented 10.2%. That is, those with no religious affiliation are growing very fast, but evangelicals were growing very slowly or plateauing, and Roman Catholics were slowly declining.⁶⁷

Finally, a third study done in May 2007 by the marketing research company Demoscopia⁶⁸ focused specifically on young Costa Rican people (between the ages of 15-35) (N:2,500). This study concluded that people in this age bracket are facing several challenges not previously faced by their elders. These include having to learn English in order to find a well paying job, facing daily the challenges of violence in the streets and insecurity, while engaging less in politics. An interesting datum of this study shows that of the 98% of the young Costa Ricans who believed in God, 70% of them were Roman Catholics, 18% were evangelicals, and another 10% claimed to be Christians in general.⁶⁹

Wrapping up this chapter, one may conclude that there is a history of forced assimilation and religious exploitation in Costa Rica. Yet, they were and are mostly Roman Catholics in their cultural affiliation. Through the years, the population has become less and less Roman Catholic, and a little more evangelical, other faiths, and non-faith. There has been a desertion among Roman Catholic and evangelicals, and the evangelical church has plateaued in the last 15 years, and now may be facing nominalism. If McGavran would have written from the Latin American perspective his book *The Bridges of God*, he would classify both churches (Roman Catholic, and evangelicals) as good examples of the “mission station” model.

Certain gender, age group, ethnic groups,⁷⁰ and religious groups may have become a challenge for assimilation by the evangelical church. Evangelicals have shown to be effective evangelizing nominal Roman Catholics, but are not prepared on how to do mission to a growing population that declares itself as “non religious.” Other problems have not been addressed by evangelicals, like socio-structural problems, political instability, an open religious market, ecclesiological and theological deficiencies are

some of the main issues. In order to conclude this chapter, one question comes to mind: Are the Costa Rican churches facilitating an encounter between God and non-believers or being an obstacle because of the organizational culture they manage as “church”? In the next chapters, the reader will capture that the church’s culture in Costa Rica may not be even open or friendly to new people.

PART II: FOUR CASE STUDIES OF CHURCH ASSIMILATION IN COSTA RICA

Part II presents the six chapters of the fieldwork of this dissertation as described in Chapter 1. Chapters 3 through 6 provide the results of participant observation in the churches during worship and collates these with an account of the interviews of church leaders, visitors, and drop-out members. Recalling Ammerman (1997), the culture of the congregation is reflected in patterns of activities (e.g., patterns of relationships, the use of language, and the display of artifacts), including especially what the congregation does in worship. The things observed and topics queried in each case study fall into the following sections: the setting, the meeting (worship), the leadership structure, assimilation strategy, those being assimilated, and those who left the church. Next, Chapter 7 integrates a general interpretation and application of the cases from Chapters 3 through 6.

Finally, Chapter 8 describes, analyzes, and interprets the longitudinal surveys of six months where newcomers were followed up to share their impressions about the churches they were visiting, following a methodological approach by Rainer (1999, 7-9). First, the researcher gathered as much as possible of the basic church information, such as the history of the church and statistical information. None of the religious groups, however, had statistical information, or they did not want to provide it by saying that it was not up to date. Second, the church staff information was researched, including leadership, preaching themes, leadership styles, and organization, among others. Third, to understand the content and activities of what each religious group understands as assimilation, the researcher had to also gain an understanding of the views of these religious groups related to evangelism and discipleship (training of leaders or disciples),

as well as their vision and mission. Fourth, the researcher gathered information about the visitors including their origin, motives, and expectations. Fifth, the researcher sought to gather the church's expectations and requirements. Sixth, the researcher gathered information about the levels of pastoral care for those who join and leave each congregation. In technical words, this section works as a thick description bringing all of the analyzed data together and presenting the findings about how these churches are assimilating visitors in Costa Rica.

CHAPTER 3: LA COMUNIDAD CRISTIANA VIDA ABUNDANTE CORONADO

The road to church is busy and narrow as cars and buses compete for space on their way up to San Antonio de Coronado. Once it was a rural town up in the hills toward the mountains, east of the capital city of San Jose, but now it is a busy suburb and one of the fastest growing of the metropolitan area. There lies *La Comunidad Cristiana Vida Abundante* (Christian Community Abundant Life). It was founded in 1993 as a home church. Now 13 years later it is a megachurch with a weekly attendance of approximately 4,500 people, 750 of them children. Their mission statement is “to make each member of the family a disciple of Christ.” Their emphasis is on family issues: Family-disciples-Christ. In the words of one of its associate pastors, Miguel Sanchez, the church exists to attract people and accomplish God’s purpose. They do not have a membership system, but they know that they can count on 1000 committed people. This is the mother church of four other churches, one in Miami and New York, one mission church, and a “friend congregation” (an independent church that just joined them to receive support but do not yet belong to them).

This church is one of the very few non-Pentecostal megachurches in the country. The largest churches in Costa Rica are Pentecostal churches. The churches of the Assemblies of God report a community of 60,000 people. One Pentecostal independent church, *Misión Cristiana la Rosa de Sarón*, reported a membership of 12,000 people. By January 2001, *Vida Abundante* appeared with an attendance of 2,000 people (PROLADES, 2001).

The Setting

My first visit to this congregation started during the middle of March. They have four worship services: Saturday 7:00-9:00 p.m., Sunday 8:00-10:00 a.m., 10:30-12:00 p.m., 5:00-7:00 p.m.

Entering the gates of the church's property, one is given a plastic card for the security of the car. Without such a card, no one can leave the property which may indicate that any car could be stolen even at church. As one continues to drive in, the installations appear. On the left were office buildings, on the right an elementary school building for high middle class Christians. The elementary school serves as Christian education purposes for children on the weekends, and during the weekday night, serves to host the huge variety of ministries meetings. Then comes the sanctuary, which has the round shaped of a plane hangar. It has a capacity to host 1,350 people.

The parking lot was very big and surrounds the building. There were young people who helped provide directions to park the car. The weekend of the second visit, for the first time ever there were handicap parking spaces. Grounds were fair, but not generous in green areas, and only the guava trees control the landscape.

Approaching the sanctuary at its entrance there were several stands. The most colorful one is the "*pulpe*," a ministry stand that "sells" bags of groceries to donate to needy families of the areas. One may purchase a bag of groceries from one to four dollars. On the opposite side, another stand sells Christian books and Bibles. In between were two stands that sell desserts, coffee, bottled drinks, ice cream, etc. By the second visit there were two more new stands promoting small group development using the book *Forty Days With a Purpose* written by Rick Warren. Starting in the last week of April

and during the next seven weeks, the sermons were based on the book as well. This was an attempt to start small groups at church but the activity did not have any follow up. It was a fiasco.

The Meetings

Entering the sanctuary, through its five doors, each door had ushers providing a bulletin with information about church activities. Every service, every weekend, had the same order of worship. There are a total of six songs, three upbeat songs, and a time of prayer to get a transition into three more low beat songs. After the worship, songs (30-35 minutes) a time of video announcements and welcoming words (10-15 minutes) take place, and once a month they present new babies to the congregation. After that a special song follows, and then comes the time of the message (sermon). There was no Scripture reading or pastoral prayer. The sound and lighting system is not great, and the use of PowerPoint for the songs and the sermon was very rustic. Every worship service transmits live through internet video on their website.

Pastors and worship leaders dressed very casually. For Pastor Miguel Sanchez, the church has “a very natural way to attract people; we do it in a very transparent way and not very liturgical.” He also recognized that this church grew quickly, and now they cannot provide care for the people, as well as homogeneous groups and small group efforts. Like any other megachurch in the country, it is mainly attended by middle and upper class people. The sermons were well presented, when the seniors pastors preach, but were not very good when others preached. People seemed to be much involved in the topic. Three of the speakers who usually present the message every month are well known in the Christian and secular circles. Every message was contemporary in

application, even though the message emphasized popular psychology while the biblical text is sacrificed. For instance, the second Sunday sermon topic was the dysfunctional family vis-à-vis the Christian family.

In addition to Sunday meetings, throughout the year there are several conferences, which even people from outside the congregation visit. These conferences are one weekend long and deal with topics on women, family, marriage, men, children, and leadership issues. Every Wednesday night is Bible study, prayer group was on Thursday, and single and married people meet every other week on Friday. Every night there was discipleship courses and small groups meet at homes at their convenience. Elders meet weekly on Tuesdays, while on Thursday afternoon pastoral staff meets. On Mondays the pastors do not work.

During the announcements time is when the new visitors are noticed. They were asked to raise their hands and then receive welcoming hands from everyone. Every two months, the church organizes a one night information meeting about the church for those who have decided to join “the church family.” In that meeting, people received information about the church, including doctrinal stands. The people had the opportunity to provide their information, and to check on areas where they would like to serve. All the pastors were presented with their different ministries, and everyone had the chance to ask questions to the pastors. At the end, they had a closing moment where all attendees stand up and the pastors pray for them. This is a ceremony, according to Pastor Mario Castro, which was a welcoming to the “church family.”

After that people did not receive any follow up, however. If one of those who have decided to join “the family” never comes back to church, no one would even know

their absence. Pastor Miguel recognizes that this is the weakness. This is a church of heavy traffic and there is no system to provide pastoral care to the people, unless the people take the initiative to actively seek to get involved in the many different activities of the church. The senior pastor Salazar recognized that following up new people who comes to church is a weak area for the church. He believed, however, the one who invites them should be responsible for the guests. Pastor Miguel also added that each church is like a pair of shoes, it does not fit everyone.

The Leadership Structure

Vida Abundante has an eldership structure of five leaders and their wives. Above them are the senior pastor and founder, Ricardo Salazar, a former professional soccer player. Next in line are several paid pastors along with volunteers in charge of different areas of ministries. Salazar, as well as Milton Rosales, a pastor of one of the daughter *Vida Abundante* churches in Costa Rica, has become a radio and TV personality. They participate in a one hour daily radio program and in a weekly one hour T.V. program named “*Nunca es Tarde*” (It’s Never Too Late) where they discuss ethical, personal and social issues using non-religious language. This program is on a public TV station (channel 13), and it had become the most watched program on that channel on Thursday nights.

During the period of June of 2006 to December of 2006, this church was restructuring. A new vision and plans were being developed. The pastors were available to share some of these aspects, but other issues had not been resolved yet. In their thinking, one of the important things was the acquisition of more buildings and land.

One possibility was that one of the next door companies that went broke and had their building for sale.

In a document, that the Senior Pastor Salazar developed called “We are a church that...” *Vida Abundante* expressed those theological aspects that the researcher interpreted as values.

Those values are the following: “a Christ-centered church with an evangelical theology” without “a traditional liturgical style.” “Christian leadership” found in the model of Jesus through teamwork, service, and spiritual gifts. “Preaching and Teaching God’s word” helps inspiring, training, and transforming lives of people. The principle of “Discipleship” develops Christ’s character in each person. “A restorative community” that may respond with love, grace, and mercy in the family, social, political, and religious scenarios. This church believes in “Family” providing teaching tools and a sense of home for those who do not have one. A “Restorative community” responds with love, grace and God’s mercy in a lost society, as well as a church with a “prophetic message” denouncing social, religious, and family injustice. A church sensitive to “seekers,” that believes in “holistic mission,” “cross-cultural missions,” providing “training to other churches,” “financial integrity,” and “the use of Mass Media” to communicate the gospel.

Assimilation Strategies

According to Pastor Castro, this church values honesty, integrity, and openness. For Pastor Salazar this church is not a paternalistic church and people should not depend on their pastors, as everyone is responsible of his or her own care. For Salazar and Sanchez, it was important for the people to feel part of the family, be trained, and disciplined. According to Pastor Castro, developing good members and good leaders are

important tasks. For instance, for him the best words of wisdom can be “come close to God with a generous heart.” For Pastor Sanchez, this church is a place of refuge and restoration. Someone serving according to his or her gifts is important for this church. Anyone who wants to serve will serve in this church. The person must show commitment, giftedness, and have the values of humility, and sincerity. This church values a horizontal leadership. For Pastor Sanchez, this church was currently working on a project of assimilation which may start in January of 2007. Miguel Sanchez mentions that they wish to receive seekers not church people.

According to the senior pastor Salazar, their evangelism strategy is relational. It is about people inviting people to church, and that had been one of their secrets of growth. All the pastors expressed that there were no intentions to change the church’s liturgy and the evangelistic strategy of the church; however, they wish the worship service were shorter. The growth of this church had pushed them to invest in properties, instead of ministers to attend to the people, according to Pastor Miguel Sanchez. He described the church as seeker sensitive. There was also another ministry called “coffee with love.” Once a month, late at night, they visited downtown San Jose, and take coffee and sandwiches to transvestites and prostitutes while sharing the Good News with them (this ministry was not currently in service at the time of the research).

Therefore, the ways this congregation engaged people were the public personalities of the preachers of this congregation, the good music, and good sermons. To become a member of the “church family” is simple. Just keep coming and somehow get involved as a volunteer in one of the many ministries. That is, after attending someone by

own initiative will have to get involved in the many levels of discipleship groups, and consequently involved in one of the ministries.

According to Mario Castro, pastor of families, the success of this church was because it practices restoration. According to Pastor Salazar, three people had been asked to leave the congregation because after talking to them, they continued their misbehavior. Misbehavior includes issues of sexual harassment.

For Pastor Miguel Sanchez the church was working hard to develop discipleship groups and homogeneous groups. This was a big challenge for the church now. As noted, there was no followthrough to the study of *Forty Days With a Purpose*, so only a very few of the 150 groups continued to meet after one month. There was little pastoral supervision in the process of organizing small groups. According to Pastor Salazar and Sanchez, they are working on a project to develop a welcoming booth, with brochures, people welcoming people, and were going to have database software for visitors and returning members of the family.

The senior pastor, the main pastors, and elders had not received any formal seminary training. Some of them, however, are taking seminary courses. On the other hand, the regular people have the chance to take good discipleship courses at church. Some of their teachers were seminary students.

Currently in Costa Rica, there had been a major conflict among evangelical churches dividing them into two big groups. One group, mainly composed by neopentecostal churches, and had developed a theology that explains that in this new century God is again raising God's apostles to lead the church. This is the apostolic era, and all churches must submit to these apostles in order to grow and receive blessings.

These apostles, in their mystic appointment, provide spiritual coverage, healings, special blessings of prosperity, all in exchange for money. These prosperity theology leaders are becoming very rich, and many people are willing “to sow their seed” to receive a special blessing. Against this movement, *Vida Abundante* has taken leadership and has developed its image, but the message is primarily negative: “We are not like them.” This is the reason the three interviewed pastors contrasted their church against the others. They express that *Vida Abundante* is a “healthy church” because it does not carry the abuses of such bad leadership and does not follow the financial exploitation of those churches. Pastor Miguel stated the strength of this church is found in the following areas: a relevant message, a leadership model of service and humility, and the casual liturgy because it is not charismatic.

Regarding their understanding about the Kingdom, for Mario Castro, “We notice God’s kingdom by experiencing it right here right now. We notice the restorative and healing work of the Holy Spirit.” Ricardo Salazar added, “The Kingdom is the miracle of Christ coming into the life of the person. It is a genuine declaration of the lordship of Christ, how a person and a community incorporate those values as theirs, principles, desires, and commandments of Christ, submitting to Him all priorities and dreams. It sums up the prayer of Christ in Gethsemane, a total submission to the will of Christ.” For Pastor Sanchez, “We enjoy the grace, love, blessings here and now. Those who seek to carry out the will of God are part of the kingdom of God.”

Those Being Assimilated

During the time the researcher started visiting this congregation, Doña Jeanete and Don Reynaldo came for the first time and continued visiting with the intention to join this congregation.

Doña Jeannette said that she accepted the Lord in 1995. While her husband attended the Christian Fraternity of Business Men, there was a ministry for the wives called “fertile land.” She was a Catholic. Then her husband began attending an evangelical church, and she noticed changes in the life of her husband. At that church, a pastor made a comment about her daughter’s marriage that should have been kept confidential. That was very painful for her, and she decided to quit attending. Nevertheless, they kept active within the fraternity of businessmen, helping provide counseling and support to those marriages in trouble. Among those couples, they heard about *Vida Abundante*, and so they decided to pay a visit. “*Vida Abundante* was that something I was looking for. The first day I got there I felt something pretty... you do not hear ‘Amen, brother’, ... they teach you to have a relationship with God. I have been faithful attending and participating in different activities and I feel very good.”

She did not see any changes in her life since visiting *Vida Abundante* but even though, she considered that her relationship with Christ was better now. “I feel different, that there is something different I am experiencing there.” What attracted her first to *Vida Abundante* was “the Charisma of the pastor, the music... the video projection helps with singing... the people that comes there.” “I consider myself a member of *Vida Abundante*”, she added. Moreover, evaluating herself from 1-10, 10 being the highest level of integration in the church, and 1 the lowest, she evaluated herself an 8.

She expected to become “the person God wants me to become ... the woman, the mother, and the friend God wants me to become.” In addition, she said, “I see myself working and serving along with my husband.” She did feel that *Vida Abundante* was helping her to grow spiritually. The sermons, no matter the preacher, she considered that what she likes the most, and there is nothing she did not like or would change.

She had been able to develop ten new friends in *Vida Abundante* since her first visit. She did notice that *Vida Abundante* was for people of a higher socioeconomic class, but she considers them “friendly and nice.” Her children, however, were not currently attending church. But she expected that to change soon. The benefit of becoming a member of *Vida Abundante* “was the blessings I can receive from it.” According to her that was what makes a difference at *Vida Abundante* (making it different from other congregations) “it is the people, those who preach and they know how to get to the people.” In addition, she added, “they do not abuse people by asking for money.”

A mature person in *Vida Abundante*, she described as someone with the right convictions, respectful, sincere, and kind. She liked the way things were done in *Vida Abundante*. The leaders, according to her, were good servants and glad to be there.

She was not able to remember any slogans or memorable phrases, not even the mission statement of the church. She was, however, able to remember sermon topics, where she highlighted two recent ones: “the prodigal son” and one on “goals and purposes for life.”

The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian person was, she mentioned, that “what one does must be done with the heart.” What she had been able to

learn in *Vida Abundante* that she did not learn in other churches was “valuing me, becoming more compassionate, kind and sensitive to others.”

In the next five years in *Vida Abundante*, she sees herself serving at church, “working hard and serving with the marriage ministry.” Among the obstacles in her spiritual growth, she finds herself to be the one of “the fear to do or to become.” Nevertheless, she wanted to become a great servant to God, to keep studying the Word, and being a good witness to bring others to Christ.

Don Reynaldo accepted the Lord in 1982. He had belonged to three churches, the third one being, *Vida Abundante*. “I accepted the Lord, but I didn’t know the Lord.” It was not until his second church that he began growing in knowing the Lord. “The vision of that church changed,” however, and he decided to leave his leadership position. After six months of prayer and recommendations of other people, the Lord guided him and his family to *Vida Abundante*. *Vida Abundante* came once and again through others, and the Lord came confirming that. He said, “From our first visit we felt at home.” He added, “I have found peace, feel closer to Christ, and am experiencing a prosperous and successful life in the last year. The relationship with the Lord is the closest ever, and is a big change in my life.” Still there were no significant changes in the family and friend’s relationships.

“We are ready to serve at church and get integrated. Actually, we are planning to buy a home near the church, so we may serve better. I want to serve with children.” He felt that he was growing spiritually in *Vida Abundante*. For the informant, it was difficult to nail down one aspect he liked the most in *Vida Abundante*, but he added, “I like the pastors at *Vida Abundante*. They do not dress up in expensive suits, sit in a special pew,

or are part of *La Visión*. The pastors speak up clearly and call things by their names. I like that to be direct.” He also expressed liking very much the possibility of buying the sermons records after church in a CD format. Now he said, he has a good collection of sermons. He would like to get to know the church better and to have a better picture, so he can comment about what to keep, change, or maintain.

He considers between 30-35 people as close friends in the last year. Participating in a marriage enrichment activity helped him to grow deeper in his faith. “That renews my love for my wife even more.”

The types of people that *Vida Abundante* seemed to attract, according to him, are those who run away from *La Visión*. People are running away from those churches. These people more than non-believers are the ones being attracted to *Vida Abundante*. All of his family members attend this church. He wanted to dedicate his life to Christ.

To describe *Vida Abundante*, he said; “It is a happy house, where one can find peace, edification, the Word, and a healthy church.” *Vida Abundante* makes a difference where other churches do not, in its emphasis on “family issues.” Those aspects that value *Vida Abundante*, according to him, were the relationship within the family, with our mates, children, and friends. *Vida Abundante* values service. “No one I have seen serving are proud. All leaders are humble, no one shows up.”

He sees himself five years from today at *Vida Abundante* “living near by the church and fully serving Christ there. No one is forcing us to serve here and there is freedom to serve at this church.” In a few words, he expected in the near future to be used by Christ even more, serving, and participating more. Specifically, he will be serving

with children, in the ministry of theater, and taking that ministry into the world as an evangelistic outreach.

If *Vida Abundante* would like to continue pleasing God even more, according to the informant, there should be a ministry of intercession during the service by praying for those in worship. He noted that *Vida Abundante* does not have an altar call, lacks follow up to visitors, and lacks teaching to integrate them, because the orientation activity to new people is very general. For him, people need formation and attention, as well as understanding of “holy communion”, aspects of doctrine, and members need to identify more with the congregation.

None of the informants were able to recite the mission and values, nor any slogan, new words, or new concepts learned, or memorable phrases at *Vida Abundante*. However, Reynaldo was able to mention a series of sermons that has captivated his attention and impacted his life.

Those Who Left the Church

On the one hand, Adrian grew up in a nominal Roman Catholic family. He began to hear about Christ when participating in ecumenical youth camps, sponsored by the Roman Catholic group near his homes, which is a half a block of distance from *Vida Abundante*. Then he married a Christian⁷¹ woman, but it was not until a famous evangelist came to *Vida Abundante* when he accepted Christ. As soon as the *Vida Abundante* moved to the present location, he and his wife decided to visit. “Twelve years ago the church had 200 members. It was very personal and the pastors were very relational.”

On the other hand, Noelia as well grew up in a nominal Roman Catholic family. Her mom became a Christian and that influenced her to come to Christ. In her life time, she visited approximately fifteen churches and was an active member of three of them. She joined *Vida Abundante* because a friend, who later became her boyfriend and is now her husband, invited her. “I liked the style of preaching, the huge number of people visiting, and the fact that no one asked me where I was coming from, or anything about me. Then, I joined the singles’ group, and the hiking ministry.” Later she became a leader of later group. Today, Noelia and her husband have moved to a different area of the country and have not joined a church yet. She would like a church where a good doctrine is taught, where people have fun, where people can serve, and where serving is encourage.

Then, Adrian and his wife started visiting another church. “I am visiting this other church because my wife feels fine there. I do not like that place because it is very liturgical. It is too formal, and too much respect is shown to the pastor (e.g., the preacher is introduced every service and everyone stands to welcome him).” He is looking for a “non denominational church that has more freedom, a church like *Vida Abundante*”. However, he did not want it to be so psychological in its sermons and teachings, one that avoided the service becoming a show, and being a more participatory worship. I like VA, but my wife cannot stand attending that church. My wife did become a member of another church which we visit every Sunday.” He misses the sermons, friends, and being able to serve the church he loved. “I miss serving the Lord there, but I know I can serve God anywhere else.”

As a part time leader of sports at church he got involved in a case of intent of sexual harassment of a teenage girl. The pastors of the church, in order to avoid the shame, fired him. There was no process of care, restoration, and mentorship, even though, that process was promised to him. “A couple of pastors visited me during the first couple of weeks, then, they forgot about me. Some friends at church did provide care, but not the leaders of the church.” He felt hurt from the lack of care of the leadership of *Vida Abundante*, but he did not feel hurt with God or the people from church.

“I learned from this experience. I am a more mature and alert person regarding flirting and more careful with the opposite sex. In regard to church, I believe it is not a place for refuge, or a place of openness. Church is not a place to be vulnerable.” He found help in psychological therapy and participating in a small group of men.

Noelia, before leaving *Vida Abundante*, served as a lay pastor of the ministry that Adrian refers about. In the beginning, she was helping with the ministry, then after a teaching from the senior pastor of the church about serving God, where saying no to serving at church was equal to saying no to God, she decided to become the coordinator of the sports ministry. She had a full time job, was recently married, was studying theology, and then accepting a volunteer part time ministry at church. “I tried to plan my agenda as best I could, but throughout the months with fundraising for the ministry, counseling leaders under my supervision (two facing divorce), I went to find help from the senior pastor and got an appointment a few weeks later. In that meeting I told him that I needed help and he told me a long story about how the structure of the church works, and that I could find help in other ministries such as in counseling. I left the meeting as I came, empty and needing help.”

Weeks became months, and the blessing of serving at church became a heavy load. “I talked to other leaders and they were also feeling lonely and burned out.” Therefore, I asked for another meeting with my pastor to told him about this and presented him with the problem, and solutions. He was in a hurry, however, and told me that he had only one hour. When I told him about what was going on with me and other leaders not having pastoral support to serve in their ministries, he became very angry. He intimidated me, and I had to leave the room without ending the meeting. I was looking at an aggressor. I was hurt. I got into the car where my husband was waiting for me and starting crying.” Later, she sent a letter of resignation from such ministry, and there was no apology, no meeting, and no thank you. “Simply I think, he thought ‘another one not capable of supporting the pressure’.”

Only a very few friends knew in detail what happened to Noelia, and why she resigned from her ministerial position. “My closest friends provided me support, but nothing from my pastor, nor any other leader at church. I was not feeling good looking at “an aggressor pastor” at the pulpit preaching about love and tolerance. I believed my problem was idealizing leaders, I believed my pastor was super man.” Then she quit attending *Vida Abundante*, and a few months later moved to another part of the country. She learned from this experience to “idealize only God and to know the way an administrative pastor works in a megachurch, and I do not like that at all”

Adrian considered that he was evangelized but not disciplined. “What I learned, I have learned in my theological studies. For instance, concerning Wednesday Bible studies, if the senior pastor is not teaching, they get fifty people, from a Sunday attendance of 4500 folks.” Noelia added, “when I first came to this church it looked to me

that none was interested in the visitors, because I spent many weeks without being noticed.”

For Adrian and Noelia both discipleship and assimilation in *Vida Abundante* did not exist. Noelia evaluated the discipling and evangelistic work of the church as very bad. “It is not clearly defined. There was no planning, and the mission of the church was not being accomplished.” Adrian mentions, “those near the pastor, once a month, received mentorship teachings. I believe VA tries to evangelize, but they are stuck with programs instead of serving people (i.e., people oriented). Now, there is a social action ministry of holistic mission that provides good evangelism. They provide food baskets to poor people and teach them about God. Very few ministries are projected to the world, but the majority of the ministries are for those who come in.”

Vida Abundante “attracts people because it is a non-threatening environment for a non-believer. For any believer it is a place of healing and is not abusive. It is a big place and a big organization, and people may like that. Going to *Vida Abundante* may people feel proud of a large church.” But also, *Vida Abundante* “rejects those who do not get themselves included. The information meeting of the church is about informing people, not about listening to them and their needs.” Noelia added, “preaching is good and that attracts people, and how a non Christian person once told me ‘I go to church every weekend because I receive free therapy.’”

Adrian said, “leaders are burn out! Pastors have not been able to support the growth of *Vida Abundante*. Even the lay leaders and volunteers do not receive any care and end up tired and disappointed. There are leaders who serve to please the senior pastor, to be near him. The platform did not grow with the congregation. Pastors have left

and have not being replaced. The upper pastors received huge salaries, but others receive low paychecks. Small leaders have to fight for their rights to serve and receive any help and a decent budget.” Noelia mentioned that “there is no pastoral care, but loads and loads of work.” “When you are inside you understand that for the senior pastor it is more important to develop good relations with the rich people at church, than helping the poor in the community (e.g., scholarships for low income kids to join the church’ school). The pastor executes his power in a tyrannical way dividing people among those who are with him and those against him; and he preaches tolerance, and equilibrium!”

Both, Adrian and Noelia, left the church and were hurt, but they left good friends behind. They were not angry with God, but both had a feeling of lack of trust in the organized church and in all-powerful pastors.

Conclusion

This congregation is a good example of what often characterizes neopentecostal megachurches in Costa Rica. These types of churches are usually led by dynamic pastors with little or no theological education. Church “members” often receive very little pastoral care, and lay leaders are assimilated into the church quickly but then end up leaving because they are not being nurtured. Attending church was akin to going to the stadium, and the worship service is almost like a mass therapy session. All these characteristics bring together a new style of doing church.

Vida Abundante has been made up of upper middle class, professional people. The port of entry (assimilation start point) of this congregation seems to be the sermons preached by its “famous” preachers. These sermons usually focus on popular psychology

topics (self-help), emphasizing family issues. This church focuses on being seeker sensitive, but it seems to draw people mostly from neopentecostal megachurches.

Vida Abundante is the fastest growing church among non-Pentecostal churches in Costa Rica. Interestingly, it did not have any explicit strategies for membership, evangelism, assimilation, or discipleship. The newcomer neither received care nor follow-up. Membership requirements consist only of attendance. No expectations are placed upon those who attend regularly, aside from the assumption that they will give financial support and serve in a ministry. The environment at church was anonymous, with little interaction among the worshippers. How had a church that seemingly not doing anything “right” to grow, managed to grow so fast? This question will be considered in the final chapters of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4: LA COMUNIDAD CRISTIANA CAMINO DE VIDA

La Comunidad Cristiana Camino de Vida (Walk of Life Christian Community) was a house church in Zapote, two miles from downtown San Jose. This community met at the home of their pastors Daniel and Doris Castro. When the researcher met the pastor and received his permission to do the study, the pastor was instructed that neither he nor his wife should greet the researcher as a friend or seminary professor on Sunday morning. The point was, because it is a very small church, to test the friendliness of the people. This church was one of only a dozen or so house churches in Costa Rica and the researcher had visited four. This was a new model for doing church that has emerged in Costa Rica. Some of the pastors had developed a relationship among themselves after finding out they were doing something similar.

The Setting

The upper middle class neighborhood was quiet and the house church met at the end of the street. Outside, there were a couple of teenagers who watch for the ten cars of those families coming to worship. There were no signs of a church anywhere. It just looked like a party, or a large family gathering was going on in there. On Sunday, the researcher arrived and had to go through two metal gates. The first was the door of the garage, the second for the house, and then there was a wooden door to enter into a small hall. Entering the house, anyone would notice that on the hall to the left are two bedrooms, a half bathroom, and the office of the pastors. Turning right through the hallway, there was the dining-living room area on the left, and the kitchen on the right.

Then, the visitor would face glass doors to the back porch, and the backyard area where the services took place.

It was a medium size home. The doors to the backyard leave behind the living-dining room, and divide the porch in two. The porch is about 20 feet wide and 5 feet deep. The backyard filled with grass and plants was about the same size as the porch. Twenty-five chairs occupy that meeting space, set for the approximately eighteen people who came from a list of forty members, who might attend worship each Sunday. On each opposite corner of the porch area, there was one fan and one small speaker. In the middle, there was a wooden podium with one microphone. On its left was a small sound system with a tape player. During communion Sunday, the first Sunday of each month, two small-decorated tables, on each side of the podium, held the small cups of grape juice and small pieces of bread. Behind the podium was the backyard.

The Meetings

Worship was very simple in this congregation. Sunday school is from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., and the service was from 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. In Sunday school, they were studying the application of tools for inductive Bible study. Ten students on the average make the Sunday school very participative. The service starts with prayer for the ten attendees. After a long 5 minute prayer, they had the Scripture reading which took about ten minutes, and by then there were fifteen people in worship. The worship leader began commenting on the reading for about 5 minutes; a little sermon. Then, there was fifteen minutes of announcements inviting people to the different activities. By this time, there were eighteen people in worship. The prayer requests then took 30 minutes.

Approximately twelve people shared requests or thanksgiving and then small groups of

three to five or in pairs where people prayed for each other's requests, which took about ten minutes. Topics for prayers range from political and global issues to very vulnerable requests. This activity provided care for those who regularly attended the service; however, a non-Christian visitor could feel completely unconnected.

After praying, they sang approximately four praise songs which took fifteen minutes, and were sung using a tape backup music and lead by the pastor. After singing, if young children or teenagers came, someone took them into the pastoral office and provided them with a biblical lesson. Then the pastor preached for about 40 minutes. After the sermon, there was a final prayer (ten minutes), and then the tithes and offerings (five minutes).

During the researcher's first visit, the sermon was on Revelation 3:14 which emphasized the human indifference to seeking God, and how sin not confessed did not allow communion with God. This was part of a series on sermons on John 15 explaining the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. "God has promised us power to live each day in Christ, a power that changes our internal life so that power can be noticeable." "Sometimes we are like a good car battery but discharge.... What an arrogance pretending to live the Christian life without the Holy Spirit."

In addition to Sundays, the church organized other activities. For example, there was every Saturday at 5 a.m. a men's prayer meeting, every Thursday was women's discipleship group, every other Friday was couples' meetings, and on the other Fridays there were prayer vigil. Finally, on Mondays and Thursdays counseling time took place.

Doris wished to have a praise band, but the noise that this may generate would create problems with the neighbors. "Up to this day we have a good witness and good

relationship with the neighbors.” “Before we use to have fewer people, we met in the living room in a circle, and worship was very personal.” There were people of all ages in the group, and for them new praise songs, and old hymns had to be included to please everyone.

The Leadership Structure

Pastor Daniel grew up in a mix of Protestant (his mom) and Roman Catholic (his dad) family. During the early 1950’s, he was a very sick child and his aunt took him under her care for living nearby the only Protestant hospital, Hospital *Clínica Bíblica*. During these years, he was under the influence of his Christian aunt, and the evangelical church. He went to an evangelical kindergarden, and spent time playing around the only evangelical seminary in Costa Rica at that time (*Seminario Bíblico*).

For his elementary school years, he went back to his mom and dad, and spent time with his mom doing VBS in the garage of his house. During his middle and high school years, he decided to attend church on his own. During high school, he took part in the Navigators spending time evangelizing university students. In one of the meetings, he met his wife, who is today his copastor. Are they bi-vocational then? This is not a large enough congregation to support them. Joining the *Templo Bíblico* de San José, both Daniel and Doris accepted a learning trip for an internship to a megachurch in Mexico. Their role was to go as students for one year and learn from all the ministries of this church.

After being a business man for many years, and spending two years with no job, he suddenly discerned his calling as a pastor when he was invited once to preach to a group called *hombres de negocios* (business men worship meeting), an ecumenical group

that seeks to evangelize and disciple that homogenous group. Besides their other activities (i.e., small groups, women's group, etc.), this businessmen group never intended to become a church. That one time of preaching became many, and later on, he was hired as a pastor. He was an evangelical, however, and for some Roman Catholic leaders the church was heading into a different approach. Therefore, the businessmen leaders decided to shut down the church without informing the members of the church. Four years ago, facing this challenge, he moved the group, broke their relationship with the businesspersons ministry, and with half of the members (thirty people) moved into a rented house, right in front of the pastor's home. From there the group ended up in the pastor's home and had been there for two years already.

In the last two years, both pastors had been studying at ESEPA Seminary in the B.A. program in Pastoral Ministry. This training had helped them to improve their vision and tools as pastors. For them, "we are not a church, we are a community. Christianity is living everyday in Christ." The group had not grown in the last two years. The church received visitors but the visitors seem not to stay. They come back for a few weeks and then drift away. The pastoral couple mentions that they spent most of their time counseling Christians from other churches and non-believers. "We seek to develop a church low in activities and high on empowering the family life of the members."

"I have in my wife a great support. She is a wife many pastors may wish to have. She is prepared, she tells things to me as they are, and my daughters are good Christians. I have a great family." "My vision is that another house church with another pastor may come out of this one." He rejected what he called "sensationalism" found today that is replacing good Christian doctrines. "This church believes that the church is called to be

an answer to the world. Our purpose is to grow ourselves in a practical life, then reach others for God's kingdom.”

Assimilation Strategies

According to Pastors Doris and Daniel, what differentiates this church from any other was its biblical evangelical doctrine, “which is not based on personalities” as many churches, “for us Christ must be the center of life.” This church had not yet any formal process to help visitors become members of the group or for members to become leaders. They were a warm church but lack a system to follow up those who visit. That is, there was no process or system for assimilation. In addition, there was no strategic planning, neither an organization of leadership (besides having two people overseeing finances, and two others as worship helpers) nor a process or program for evangelism and discipleship.

Daniel is the pastor, and Doris, his wife, informally speaking was the assistant pastor. For someone to become a real member of this group, however, according to the pastoral couple, one needs to know that Christ is Lord and their doctrinal knowledge must be practical. “Must value the work of Christ in us” because Christ “dignifies and heals us.” Also, a member “must feel the commitment to function as part of the body”, obeying Christ.

The pastor did recognize the need of more training and mentorship. “This past Sunday we were attending to people until 4 p.m. and I wonder if we are doing things right. . . . There is a couple who does not want to come back to church and argue that they have a small church near their home. They want to talk to us, but I wonder sometimes if we are doing things right. People come and go, but lately we have been having visitors; I wonder if I am the right person for pastoral ministry.” In the beginning, Daniel felt bad

because of having a small church, and he sometimes felt like competing with other “successful pastors.” According to Daniel, many people today follow the signs of the Spirit, instead of finding a relationship with the Spirit.

Daniel perceived the kingdom of God as “the government of God, if I am in the Kingdom I must be obedient to God’s rule.” Doris understands the Kingdom as, “it is the salvation that God brought to us through Christ as savior and our function on earth is to expand that kingdom. It is a holistic salvation, concerned about the needs of people.” “We help people in need.”

One Being Assimilated

At the end of the six months, only one out of the five visitors/informants remained in the house church. Her name is Maria Eugenia, a woman in her late 50’s. She has been a Christian for 10 years. During that time, she visited and was a member of five churches. Before coming to this church, she spent six months visiting a family member in the United States, facing the painful divorce she was going through. Then she came back to Costa Rica and was invited by her son to visit this church. This son, after six months of attending this church, has abandoned his faith.

Her previous church was an apostolic one, strong in spiritual warfare, liberation, and prayer against evil spirits. That church, however, was legalistic against women, and the clothing women would wear. “The pastor was offensive, abused people and took money from church. I left this church because I was not able to change its culture. That was an urban low class church and I was able to help in many things. In this church, however, all are professional people, so I don’t have much to help with.”

She had evaluated that her life had not changed much by coming to this church. “I am the same Christian.” Her relationship with God, with others, and herself had not been affected by visiting this church. She considered that this church was small and caring like a family, and the pastors were very approachable, loving, and do not make people feel guilty and do not require tithing. “I have learned in this church to have faith in God and in what one does while the Spirit guides you.” She believes, however, that she was not that kind of believer yet. What she liked most about this church, was that it is different from the megachurches and large churches she used to attend where the pastors are not approachable and are manipulators.

On the other hand, she believed that this church is “passive” and “not filled with the Spirit” and that does not fill her spiritual life. That was what make this congregation different from others. In other words, she believed that she was not growing spiritually at this church, even though, she admitted not practicing any spiritual disciplines. She would like a church that was more aggressive in prayer and spiritual warfare.

She had not been able to attend church lately because she was constructing and expanding her home. She felt bad because the church moved, and now requires of people to help in the cleaning and other thing at the new building, and she did not have time to cooperate. That is, the house church is no longer a house church, but is becoming a very small church. Her renovation project at home had increased her stress levels and seeing her son rejecting the Christian faith causes her more pain.

Maria Eugenia believed that this church was for families, for high middle class people. “I invited my maid to church and introduced her as ‘my helping lady at home’, but after visiting twice she did not want to come back. “I noticed that the people who

attend this church have a certain status that makes poor or uneducated people not feel very welcome.”

She, however, felt welcome but she admitted, “I need to practice spiritual warfare and liberation.” She did not consider herself a member but also not a visitor, “something in between”, but she was not thinking about becoming a member. Considering a member of this group within a continuum from 0 to 10, she considered herself a five. She did not see any benefit of becoming a member. For instance, she admitted not being able to develop friends at church. “I know them all, but I have no close friends.”

She did not see herself five years from now in this church. She admitted that “this church does not exploit people and make them feel guilty, but I would like a church more aggressive in spiritual warfare.” “Pastors are humble, people are approachable and friendly, they accept people, they are very passive, but a good biblical church” but I cannot see myself five years from now in this church. She mentioned something very interesting. “Something happened at this church that people do not stick. Something is needed. All the members are part of large Christian families. No new Christians.”

Those Who Left the Church

This section will present two out of the four informants who stop attending church, while the researcher was doing his longitudinal interviews. Stephan is US citizen but is married to a Costa Rican and lives there. Both are students in the BA program in Pastoral Ministry at ESEPA Seminary. At an age of young adult and after serving in the military, and being put in jail, he began to study religion and discovered that Christianity was true and the Bible trustworthy. That is how he became a Christian.

He never became a member of this church HC. In the U.S., he visited five churches and found one to his liking. Later he moved in Costa Rica and has visited many but has not been able to find one as home. His wife volunteers at a parachurch ministry, and they had decided to visit churches for a while. The characteristics of a church he was looking for were, “first and foremost, I look for solid theology/doctrine and a church that teaches the whole truth, not watering it down. I don’t want a church that teaches only the comfortable parts of Scripture.” He stopped visiting this HC “because my wife was not comfortable there and didn’t want to attend.” To evaluate the discipleship, evangelism, and assimilation programs he said: “It’s a very small church of 20-30 people and the discipleship consists of a congregational Bible study on Sunday mornings before the service. I am not sure that there is much one-on-one discipleship going on between the pastor and any church members. I believe there is also a women’s group that meets once a week, which is good. The congregation is very warm and loving, which makes for a good reception of visitors and new converts. I felt very welcomed when I started going. I don’t believe they have any sort of evangelism ministry.”

“People can feel both attracted and rejected at churches. I think the most attracting aspect of this church is the community or congregation: small, warm and welcoming.” While the rejecting element, “I can’t imagine how anyone would feel rejected by this congregation. As I said before, they’re very loving and warm. There may be some things that people don’t like about the congregation or the service, such as: not big enough; not enough younger people; don’t like the teaching; don’t like the worship; etc., but that will be true of any church.”

Another person who stopped attending *La Comunidad Cristiana Camino de Vida*, was Odin, who seemed to be perpetually leaving the Christian faith. Before attending this church, he had been a member of three other evangelical churches. By the time he was interviewed, he was going through a period of faith burn out. Back then he considered that he has never been a real Christian. Therefore, his conversion story had been reevaluated by his new experiences. He informed that came to this church seeking counseling after ending a relationship with his girlfriend. He became depressed, and because he was a classmate of the pastors, he found help there. Then something happened that he was not willing to share. Now he is neither attending nor seeking a church. “The church has lost its values. I have seen pastors, Christian leaders and seminary students in fornication, adultery, witchcraft and other things.”

Odin believes that he learned, after visiting this church, that there was no difference between being in the church and being in the world. “Even though life in the world was harsh, at least there is more freedom than in the church. . . . At church everything [sinful practices] is under the carpet because they want to protect their testimony.” He felt hurt and said that he had not received any care such as visiting, calling, etc., after the beginning of this crisis.

He was able to develop some close friends, but said “it seems like I don’t belong there.” He considered that this church worried more about numbers of people than spiritual formation. Odin thinks that even the megachurches he knew were fake as well. “People seek miracles and something that attracts people, but hypocrisy and corruption remain in these churches.” He recognized that he had not done anything to find help and missed very much participating in worship on Sundays.

Conclusion

This church represented for a while a new movement of house churches, which has appeared in the country only in the last five years or so. This style of church, however, is not homogeneous. In general, they often work like a family or small group meeting with worship and sometimes a pastor.

This House Church is the smallest church among all of the case studies and the one with the least amount of growth. Considering its size one would expect a better and more personal assimilation system. However, as we will see in chapters seven and eight, a church of this size does not depend on the assimilation efforts of the pastors.

As with the previous neopentecostal megachurch, the only requirement for membership was ongoing attendance. The newcomer received neither pastoral care nor follow-up. No expectations were placed upon those who attend regularly, besides financial support and participation in gatherings. The environment at church was cozy, with some interaction among the worshippers.

As it was in the megachurches, pastors often had little or no theological education and members received little pastoral care. Attending church was like attending an even in someone's house, and the worship service was like attending a home prayer ritual. A non-Christian visitor would likely feel completely unconnected.

This congregation, like *Vida Abundante*, was basically made up of upper middle class, professional people. The HC sermons, however, were always around biblical topics but seem not to deal with the needs of the attendees. In a nutshell, the pastors, the attendees, the newcomers, and the drop-outs recognized that people do not stay in this congregation. Like any small church, the matron or patron of that church is the one who

holds the power to decide, who gets assimilated and who does not. Chapter 8 will develop further the comparisons and contrasts between this church, the previous one, and those still to come.

CHAPTER 5: THE NORTHEAST KINGDOM HALL OF THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

There are 272 Kingdom Halls of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Costa Rica.⁷² During my research period, their monthly publication⁷³ indicated that by October 2005, Costa Rica had the second largest concentration of Jehovah's witnesses in Central America with 20,480 members (second only to El Salvador with almost 30,000). It also registered one of the highest numbers of baptisms (74), for that month. In the average of hours dedicated to preaching per member (which includes the participation of those not yet baptized), Costa Rican Jehovah's Witnesses scored the lowest with 9.2 hours per week (Honduras is the highest with 11,9 hours).

Two days after asking permission from the headquarters of the Jehovah's witnesses in Costa Rica, the researcher received a formal written response of approval to do the study in a particular congregation in San José, the Capital of Costa Rica. The response was so fast that the request was thought to be rejected. It was not, however. Their openness, cooperation, and kindness were overwhelming; just as was their persistent actions to convert the researcher into their faith.

The selected congregation is the "Noroeste" (Northwest) which meets at an old neighborhood near downtown San José. According to its main elder Don Uriel Ovaes, the Northwest was the youngest congregation with 71 baptized members and approximately 30 non-baptized ones and with the most culturally diverse (over half of the members of this congregation consisting of legal as well as illegal aliens from Nicaragua). According to the elder Marvin Calderon "90% of the people in this congregation are Nicaraguans."

This “northwest congregation” shared its building with three other Jehovah’s Witnesses congregations which are “Barrio México,” “Barrio Amón,” and “La Uruca.” The Northwest congregation was the youngest of all. In addition, according to its elders, it was the most dynamic congregation of the four. This helps explaining why the main office of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Costa Rica recommended it for this study.

It grew out of “La Uruca” and became independent with its own three elders in 1994. These four congregations shared one building having one day each during the week (from Monday to Thursday) for the theocratic school. Two of them had their main service (watchtower study) on Saturday, and the other two on Sunday. The northwest congregation met from 9-11 a.m. on Sunday.

The Setting

The section of the neighborhood where this congregation lies is hilly, and is full of old wooden homes, and the first week of visitation there was a leak in the sewer system in the street in front of the church, which made the place at times extremely smelly. The building of the Jehovah’s witnesses, however, was the best looking place in the area. It had a metal letter sign on the wall of the building, which identified the place. However, it is easy to miss the place at night, which happened to the researcher on the first visit. Entering into the building there was a black metal gate, then wooden doors, and just behind those doors at the right side, there was a room where they keep their inventory of literature and the sound system where a different usher, each week, is responsible to control. On the left side were the restrooms, as well as a couple of boards with the schedule of activities, and training sessions. Everything was extremely well organized and planned. The building was white and very clean, with nice illumination

and a good sound system. The seats however, seemed to be brought from an old movie theater and were extremely uncomfortable. The researcher tolerated only 1.5 hours seated on them, before it was necessary to stretch the lower back and allow the sciatic nerve to keep functioning properly. The only written symbol available in the building was a sign based on Acts 5:29: “We must obey God rather than men.” This sign may provide an idea of the conflict they perceived themselves as having with the “worldly order.” In fact, this was one of the foundations of their rhetorical vision.

The setting was organized in five different areas, which were: 1) the sound control-literature room, 2) the restrooms, 3) the pulpit area that includes five chairs, two microphones one of them with a stand-pulpit type where the speech takes place, 4) the sanctuary space, and 5) a small classroom behind the pulpit area. For instance, during the worship events, every time the speaker approaches this main microphone an usher immediately adjusts it to the height of the speaker. The other microphone was for the person who read the “watch tower” articles (which happens only on Sunday morning). It was also used when they prepare the skits that serve as models to teach about communication skills on how to engage people in conversation regarding biblical topics (this happens only on Wednesday during the theocratic school). Then there were the theater seats, organized in two rows with almost five feet of space between them, and with a two feet space between the seats and the wall. The place can accommodate 171 people, and on Sundays, it was at 60% of its capacity. There was one usher with an assistant in charge of seating people and counting the attendance.

The Meetings

The first visit was on a Wednesday night of “the theocratic school.” It was not what we might understand as Sunday school because they were not divided into different ages. That is the day that they trained their new and old members on how to start, maintain and close a conversation in the streets about “biblical issues,” how to present good “enunciation” and do a “correct reading” of the Scripture, and other practical communication tools for their field visitation; as well as to discuss about doctrinal and organizational aspects. At the microphone, the main speaker sounded like a radio announcer. Only well-trained people were invited to be in front and speak.

All of the men wore their suits and ties and carry a briefcase (some of them need help picking up the right suit to fit them). The women wore upscale but comfortable dresses, with high heels and big purses. On Sundays, they dressed up in the same fashion. [My first impression generated in me a feeling of being in a sales people’s convention].

The best way to know who is a newcomer was by paying attention to those who do not dress like the others. For that matter, it was easier to identify men who were newcomers because they did not wear a suit or a tie. [I decided to keep myself from dressing up like them to maintain my status as visitor]. It was also recommended to come on Sundays, because according to the main leader, where the researcher would have a better chance to meet newcomers. Even though, there were Sunday visits, as well as two Wednesdays (theocratic school).

The theocratic school, as its name may imply, which indicates the way they believe every good follower of Jehovah should be trained. Every Sunday, and every Wednesday was structured in advance from the main headquarters in the United States.

The topic, hymns, and other issues were in a package. According to Don Uriel, “we don’t invent anything because there is a book for everything.” The elder Marvin Calderon said that the meetings have been the same since he became a Jehovah’s Witness 30 years ago. The only difference, according to Calderon, was that during the early years of the twentieth century the Witnesses used to smoke but not today. Their study of the Scriptures had shown them that they should not.

A member of this religious organization must attend three of the five sessions each week: two on Wednesday, two on Sunday, plus a home Bible study during a weeknight [you are committed or you are not a member]. The theocratic school of each Wednesday night was divided into two sessions: The first section had to do with public speech, which was from the book called *Benefit yourself from the school of the theocratic ministry*. They followed along doing lessons about good reading, pronunciation, enunciation, and anything that may help them to communicate their message to the world. They considered themselves representatives of Jehovah to the world, and during a Wednesday meeting it was said: “the most important task is to represent Jehovah, and that is the importance of a precise reading of the Scripture to the people.” This “theocratic order” was very important for them. The way the organization was structured in every detail is an example of God’s way of doing things. The second section of the meeting on Wednesday was a study of a book of the Bible. According to the elder David Ovaes (son of Don Uriel Ovaes) “the theocratic school prepares the Jehovah’s Witnesses as trained ministers, so that they may express themselves clearly and communicate the Good News to the world.”

During the time of the visitations, they were studying different sections of Nehemiah and starting the book of Esther. They were using a book called *All Scripture is Inspired by God and Useful* (edition 1990). The third section was topical and comes out of another book they have called *Reasoning from the Scriptures*. Finally they had another topic of study, which had a title already planned, but it was developed by research done by one of the elders. Of course they have their own translation of the Scriptures called *The Translation of the New World of the Holy Scriptures*.⁷⁴ Thus, in order to participate, every person should have studied in advance what was going to be discussed every Wednesday and Sunday.

On the other hand, worship time had the same structure every Sunday, as mentioned above, and it was divided in two sessions, the conference and the study of the *Watchtower* magazine. The elders explained the worship structure and gave a printed example on how every week of the year comes structured and organized, suggesting every song, the order of worship, and topic to be developed. The only spontaneous activity was the planned minutes for prayer. It is important to highlight that every Jehovah's Witness congregation around the world studies the same lesson or topic, and sings the same song around the world every week. They are extremely well-organized, always on time and keep track of time very well, something which culturally is not very Costa Rican.

Every Sunday they began with words of welcome and sing a hymn (2.5 minutes). During the hymn they play a CD soundtrack to which they sang along using their hymnals. The hymn was slow in pace and they sang along out of tune and out of beat. Then it continues with the opening prayer (2.5-3 minutes), and immediately followed

with “the conference,” which we would call the sermon. This conference may last 40-45 minutes. For example, one topic was “The joy of Jehovah and how to be a nation of joy.”

While the speaker spoke, everyone paid attention. Only those who had acquired a highest status (i.e., men elders) in the congregation have the privilege to speak. The speech was monotonous and may be perceived as lack of emotional connection with the audience. The topics, however, were relevant. At the end people applauded the speaker. The second part of the meeting, as they called it, [these two separate parts flow together smoothly] started with announcements (3-4 minutes). An interesting phrase that they used at the starting moment of the announcements: “We are very grateful to Jehovah and His organization” and they only congratulate the speaker and present the topic of the speech for next week.

The announcements were the instructions of times and places for meetings and visitations, and who would lead those routes. It was amazing that every day they had a visitation place to go. Every visit was very well planned. They meet every day at different places to begin their visitation between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m. This group visited poor and problematic neighborhoods. After that there was a hymn (2.5 minutes) and then started the study of the *Watchtower*, which seemed to be the most important study of the morning. They selected one article from the magazine *Watchtower* and the main elder directs the study. On the podium, at the main stand, appeared the elder, and at the other microphone was the assistant who reads every paragraph of the article. The article may had up to 67 paragraphs. Every person had a monthly copy, which they ordered by mail, and was brought in from the U.S., and they followed along during their meetings.

The *Watchtower* study worked as follows: The elder read the title of the article and explained how important that topic was for today's society. Then he introduced his reader, (it seemed to be a great honor to read the *Watchtower* from the podium). One topic of study was "Obeying God Above Obeying Human Authorities" (which was a study topic a week before presidential elections). Then the reader may read one or two paragraphs at the time, according to the instructions of the elder. In each article, each paragraph was numbered and had a footnote, which had a question (they read each paragraph and discuss every question).

The elder read each question; and those in the audience who wanted to participate answering the question raise their hands. They keep their hands up until the elder decided who responded to the question. The questions were so simple and so tied to the text that they required no thinking. That is, every question had its own answer in the text. It seemed like they wanted to check to see if everyone would understand the main doctrinal issues regarding the article. Then, an usher took a wireless microphone from place to place to the seat of the person chosen to answer the question.

Thus, for 60 to 80 minutes, they went paragraph-by-paragraph reading and asking the questions. To end there was a final prayer from the elder (2-3 minutes) and the service was over. As soon as the service was over, many rush to the literature room to ask or request certain printed material (material they distribute and ask for a donation when they go out in the neighborhood to "preach"). Others stayed and talk to each other. They always greet their newcomers or those who had been visiting from other congregations. They may stay chatting for even 30 minutes after the meeting, while waiting for the rented buses to take them back home.

The Leadership Structure

The organizational structure, according to elder Calderon, was as follows: First Jehovah, then His Son in heaven. Then, on earth there is the visible organization, with its governing body of 8-12 anointed men lead by the Holy Spirit. Under them come other anointed people who are the editorial body of their magazines and books. Under those editors comes the governing structure of the congregations already explained. It was admirable that the elders dedicated between 20-40 hours a week to prepare and participate in all activities in the congregation and did not receive any compensation. One of those being assimilated emphasized that “the organization cannot be changed or updated because the head of the organization is Jesus.”

Assimilation Strategies

The purpose of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, according to the main elder Don Uriel, “it is to follow the example of Jesus Christ preaching the Good News of the Kingdom.” Another elder Marvin Calderon mentioned that their purpose was “to help people get to know the will of Jehovah and his kingdom and to love Jehovah and His son.” Preaching the Good News of the Kingdom was the main expression of their religious devotion, as Jehovah’s Witnesses, it was to devote themselves to a geographic area or neighborhood from one to six times a week and knock at each door once or twice a month to preach the Good News of the Kingdom. “We work full time, study hard, and still take time to preach, do Bible studies, and visit the sick,” said Calderon.

This congregation was in charge of seven large neighborhoods. All its members lived in those neighborhoods. For instance, one of those neighborhoods was *La Carpio*,

which they divided in four sections (this neighborhood is currently the most problematic neighborhood of all San José and has the highest concentration of illegal aliens from Nicaragua. When government officials from Nicaragua have visited Costa Rica, they always visit this neighborhood as a type of “colony.” Visiting that neighborhood is a total cross-cultural experience. It is like being in a Nicaraguan town. This neighborhood is so problematic that ambulances and fire trucks have to be escorted by a specialized trained police force because these services as well as the regular police force can be robbed at any time. There are sections of this neighborhood that are not safe at all, but the Jehovah’s witnesses have been able to cruise around without much problem). They divided their membership in all those neighborhoods they must attend, and each neighborhood was divided into sections so each section can be totally covered in one month of visitations. That is, they calculated to visit each house of each of those neighborhoods at least once a month.

So a minimum of two Jehovah’s Witnesses, (an apprentice and an experienced baptized member) would knock at one’s door sometimes before ten in the morning. They met at 8:45 a.m. sharp almost every day in different geographic areas, doing their visitations from 9-11 p.m.; or they even had a 6-8 a.m. “preaching points” in the main bus stop areas. By “preaching” they meant, what we understand to be “evangelizing”. Now, for those unable to do it in the morning there were afternoon organized schedules.

As soon as the person of the home opens to the door, very warmly and kindly the Jehovah’s Witnesses approach the person to develop a conversation. First, they introduced themselves as people who care about preaching on the Kingdom. If the person showed interest on listening, they then shared one of the topics from their magazine

Despertad, known in English as *Awake*. The topics in that magazine were very relevant issues, very well written, and very well illustrated. Their approach was to explain how denigrated our society is, and how much we need God because God always had the answer and can help us to have a better life. If the person kept showing interest, the Jehovah's witnesses would give them the magazine in exchange for a monetary donation. If that happened and the person showed interest, they would ask the person if he or she would mind to being visited again next week (in their organization that would be a "re-visitation" which gets reported every week in a form to the elders of the group). The following week, if the person re-visited shows interest in the magazine and the topic of discussion, they will suggest a Bible study. If the person would keep showing interest in the Bible study, more Bible studies could be suggested, and even a visitation to one of their home groups Bible studies in the streets nearby, or an invitation to the "meeting" (worship service) may also be suggested.

Every step in the development of the person becoming a Witness was evaluated by the elders of each congregation. It was important to keep clear, and as had already been mentioned in the above paragraph, behind every new visitor there had always been a Witness' face-to-face contact. According to the elder Calderon, anyone could become a Jehovah's Witness, of course, after being examined in biblical knowledge and moral behavior. After several Bible studies participation and visits to the meetings, and if the person showed signs of getting his or her life "normalized" or getting in order with the principles of the Scriptures, then the visited person can be invited to observe how "preaching" around their neighborhood takes place. Preaching home by home is the most important characteristic of this group, the most important expression of their spirituality,

and their main ritual. Therefore, only trained, evaluated, and qualified people must participate. Any new visitor with bad language, with any kind of smoking, drinking, or gossiping problems, and with a “double life” would not qualify to continue, unless there is a change in the person’s behavior. For instance, two of the informants have had all the training, but because they were not legally married, they could not go out and preach. Thus, the “sin of fornication” was keeping them from becoming a Jehovah’s Witness.

Considering all these qualifications for at least six months and keeping a good testimony, the person could be recommended by the ministerial servants or an elder as a candidate to be baptized. Of course, in order to be baptized one needs training. Once one is baptized he or she becomes a type of “regular” Jehovah’s Witness. After a minimum of a year after being baptized, keeping a good testimony, and keeping oneself participating regularly on preaching, then one could be recommended by the ministerial servants, and or by the elders, as a candidate to become a ministerial servant. Years later of being a ministerial servant, only men can be recommended by the elders of the church to the district superintendent of the region to become an elder (which is a high level of special servant). In the case of elder David Ovares, he became ministerial servant at the age of 19 and by 23 he was an elder.

Once a year in their main offices in Costa Rica elders and ministerial servants are trained intensively for two days or for a regular training of a month. Also, every year, ten Costa Rican ministerial servants or elders could be trained in El Salvador for an intensive teaching of a full month. This training, of course, had to be paid in full by the attendee, and if they were well recommended, the attendee may receive some type of half

scholarship. Let us consider that every ministerial servant and elder is in a volunteer position.

After being an elder for some years, keeping a good testimony, and intensively participating in and organizing the preaching visits, such elder may receive the chance to become a district superintendent, if one is necessary. The only people paid for their service in the Jehovah's Witnesses' organization are those who work at the main offices in San Jose, or internationally.

According to Don Uriel, the characteristics that help any Jehovah's witnesses to serve beyond a regular leader are "dedication, respect, maturity, commitment, and experience." This is based on 1 Timothy 3:1-7. None of the elders liked to be called "leaders" because they described what they do as service.

Of course there were doctrinal differences and organizational forms, but the main aspect Don Uriel highlighted was "we preach the Kingdom home by home as regular as we can." Jehovah's Witnesses do not consider themselves Christians because they do not use such description (one Sunday, however, the researcher heard one speaker referred to them as Christians). For the elder Calderon, besides preaching home by home he mentioned another difference between a Jehovah's Witness and a non-Jehovah's Witness: "The way we speak is important. The way we speak and dress makes a difference. We don't speak about foolish stuff." That was somehow noticeable when the researcher was talking to the Witnesses (of course, all conversations took place in their Hall with regular members, and in interviews with the elders), they were very polite (they did not use popular language not even slang words) in their conversations. The elder David Ovaes explain such difference between a Jehovah's Witness and any other as "the task of

preaching (home by home) a deep study of the Bible, and keeping those norms of conduct found in the Bible.”

In one of the final questions to the elders on what should a Jehovah’s Witness should know, value, and do, the answer was:

To know: “what the Bible says, obeying the Bible by avoiding immorality . . . the fundamental truth of life found in the Bible.”

To value: “To love Jehovah . . . never with a divided heart (Jehovah/this world)”, “moral and ethical behavior. . . what the Bible establishes about a good conduct and to love God.”

To do: “To feel the desire to serve Jehovah. . . To serve in the congregation, to meet and preach (low participation can affect the spiritual life of the person) . . . accomplished the principles that God has established.”

If someone was not participating (as he or she must), the elder will chat with the person to encourage him or her to come back to the correct way. If there is no response, then there will be disciplined (this will definitely happens if the person falls into immoral behavior, which includes a public announcement about the warning in a Sunday meeting). If the person still would not respond, expulsion will be the last resource.

In regards to the Kingdom, Don Uriel said; “Satan and his system is hurting people and homes. The good news of the kingdom must be preached as the Scriptures command.” A “theology of the Kingdom” is an important aspect in their language because they do not call their building “church” but a “Kingdom Hall.” This theocratic organization constantly used a language that divides the world in a binary opposition. The corrupt system of this world is dominated by Satan; and the theocratic organization, which is identified by righteous people who avoid immorality by all means. This worldview, then, divided those who live in both worlds as well the outsiders and the

insiders because this theocratic order is the modern restoration of First Century Christian church. Any Christian person of any kind (e.g., protestant, orthodox, Catholic or any other group with Christian roots), or anyone outside the theocratic organization is wrong and lost. “The end is near... two political conflicts will define this end,” said Don Uriel. This *parousia* is definitely providing the energy for the Jehovah’s witnesses to preach, “because the Kingdom will bring peace and happiness to all.”

Don Uriel adds,

The Kingdom is coming... is already established in heaven and will be settling on earth. . . . This kingdom is going to establish the norms on how to live the purposes of God. The Kingdom has values, moral principles. Only God, at the end, will say who will be blessed by the Kingdom.

Thus, their emphasis on correct moral behavior is a sign of the Kingdom to the world that the organization is on the right path. The Kingdom has rules and cannot be broken. If they get broken one time the Jehovah’s Witness becomes an outsider.

Those Being Assimilated

Ana and Danilo were the two being assimilated during the visiting time of the congregation of Jehovah’s Witness. Danilo was a construction worker, and Ana was a housewife. She attended the congregation alone (her family are not believers), while Danilo attended it with his future wife and her child. Both of them dreamed with becoming preachers of Jehovah. Danilo used scriptural passages to illustrate some of his answers, while Ana was less eloquent to respond to the questions. They both grade themselves with a seven (using a scale 0-10 as feeling a part of this group). Both of them are Nicaraguans with more than 10 years of living in Costa Rica. Specifically, they lived in a squatter neighborhood call *La Carpio*. Both grew up in a nominal Catholic

background, but both neither participated in that faith. Actually they considered themselves as personally having no religion at all. According to Don Danilo “religion is a fraud, I was never interested in any religion.” They both used to live in sin, not married, drinking alcohol, dancing, and having a disorganized lifestyle.

One person, for both of them, provided the process of evangelization (i.e., the visitation, the contact with the magazine, the Bible study follow up, and the invitation to visit the congregation). One relationship (a new friend) brought them to their new faith. They both joined by “the preaching activity of the Jehovah’s Witness” who actively visited their neighborhood. For example, for Danilo the process of becoming a Jehovah’s witness (which was almost ending after getting married in November of 2007) took him, after receiving the first magazine to the Bible study six months; then another six months from the first study to visiting sporadically the congregation (continuing once a week the bible study at home); and from visiting to completely commit to join the faith 18 month . For Ana the process took her three years, and she needed to get married in order to then be baptized. They both consider that they are fornicating and are sinning. “The person has to be free from any gossip of living in sin,” according to Ana.

For both Ana and Danilo, their previous life (their conception of the world) is a disorder; the worst part was living in sin. Ana mentioned that she had a bad temper and loved to go dancing and partying. Ana adds, “Today I am sad to see people like me who do not value themselves, who do not know the real God (Jehovah). The world makes me sad.” For Danilo,

when one does not have the knowledge that the Bible teaches, one tends to be egocentric, one only tends to be worried about oneself. There the relations are not good. One needs to be interested in people. The Bible teaches that one needs to be interested in others, as Jehovah and Jesus were.

They both agree that their new life has meaning and value, and they are new persons. “The desire in my life is to live the 1000 years under the government of Christ. My life will be eternal, I cannot change this for anything I used to have before,” mentioned Danilo. “Imitate Jesus the son of Jehovah” (as their model to follow) for both of them is the purpose in life. What attracted them to this group was getting to know Jehovah. They both felt great at this group. “I am happy that I know the real God,” says Ana. To please God in this group is “to obey the law of Jehovah” for Danilo, and for Ana “it is to love God above all, love others, and to respect the laws and commandments of God.”

What they liked the most of participating in this group, as mentioned also above, is to get to praise the real God (Jehovah). Danilo did not find anything he disliked, while Ana mentioned, “people still commit mistakes even though they are baptized and preach. Some behave badly and use bad words.” She was able to develop around 22 new friends since visiting the group. However, she said that when she was not able to visit the group, for some reason, “I met them in the streets and they ignored me, instead of trying to help me.”

An activity that helped them grow in their faith was during holy week’s celebrating of Holy Communion (i.e., Mounday-Thursday). “It had been a very meaningful event, in prayer, unity, and feeling near to God. Unleavened bread and wine were passed person to person until a (higher) elder, those more wise, can take it [the higher hierarchy among the elders are the only ones capable of taking communion], according to Danilo.”

For both of them a group like Jehovah's Witness may attract "those above 25 years of age because they express themselves better." For Danilo, and for Ana, "those who are more orderly, who come with respect, well dressed, all has to be done in order, not like in the world in disorder." "This is an organization that follows Jehovah, the leader of the organization, we are called to follow the mandate to preach home by home and to gather together to learn more about the Bible," Danilo added. "We are the people God wants," according to Ana. The benefit, for both of them, for joining this group was having eternal life. What was different from this group (the Jehovah Witness) and others (such as Roman Catholics and evangelicals) is their eschatological understanding of the last days, when the world is in chaos, and being destroyed, and the fact that people from other faiths have bad behavior, live in sin, and are hypocrites. A slogan for them can be "Jehovah is the real God" for Ana, and "eternal life" for Danilo.

In the future, they will want to preach, become elders, feed themselves with the Bible, and to gain people for Jesus; thus becoming God's servants, so others may get to know Jehovah. "The end is coming there is no time to waste." For Danilo, for instance, children in the streets or in prostitution seem to have no future. "Parents must be responsible for them the organization of Jehovah cannot do anything to help them because they cannot understand the preaching. These people can hardly acquire the knowledge. Even if you preach to them, they won't get it. You don't do anything by helping them, giving them food, shelter, clothing, if they change but don't receive the knowledge that saves. It is not worth it, Armageddon will come and they won't be saved."

Finally, and according to Don Uriel, this congregation was young, and they have not had any members of the Kingdom Hall leaving the congregation. This is the reason they did not supply names of drop-outs.

Conclusion

This religious group represented an alternative to compare with and contrast against the assimilation efforts of new comers by evangelical churches. For the common Roman Catholic Costa Rican there is no difference between Jehovah's Witnesses and any other evangelical group. Their presence in the streets and the formal way they dress and engage in conversation makes them familiar in every Costa Rican neighborhood. In the last ten years, however, urban neighborhoods in Costa Rica have been experiencing increasing violence and robberies in the streets. This had caused a distrust of anyone knocking at your door. This had affected traditional ways of evangelism or proselytism door-to-door. This is one reason that Jehovah's Witnesses may becoming less effective in their "preaching" efforts.

Something to admire of their efforts was the number of weekly hours of "preaching," their volunteer leadership, the good training they receive, and the way that four congregations share the cost of only keeping one building running. Above all, we need to recognize their passion to go home-by-home reaching the unchurched.

Aside from their lack of contextualization, they are well trained to engage people door-to-door or in the streets every morning. Their communication skills, their good presence and enunciation, and correct reading are the result of their training at the theocratic school. That is how they train their ministers, to rescue from the evil world those who will perish. Every member is monitored and evaluated by the elders of each

congregation. For instance, they evaluate biblical knowledge, participation, and moral behavior, such as the hours of weekly preaching in the streets, attendance at worship and small groups, Bible studies with “interested” people, and their good testimony.

When comparing the Jehovah’s Witnesses with the megachurches and the House Church, several major contrasts are noticeable. The evangelical churches invite people to worship, while Jehovah’s Witnesses invite people to a Bible study. Evangelicals wait for people to come to church, while Jehovah’s Witnesses go out in the streets to engage them. Evangelicals may draw those who are already Christians to their churches, while Jehovah’s Witnesses seem to be reaching the non-Christians. Jehovah’s Witnesses place high expectations of moral behavior and ministerial service on their people, while evangelicals place very low expectations in commitment.

Every weekend, in every Jehovah’s Witness congregation, the study style is the same; it will be the same hymns, and the same order of worship in every meeting. Everything is a yearly package ordered from the United States and created by the anointed ones. There is nothing to invent and nothing to worry about. Every single detail in the organization is well structured.

Their assimilation process is well structure as explained above. Door-to-door they pay attention to those interested in their preaching who will receive a free colorful magazine. Then if the interest continues, a weekly Bible study will follow. Then the person is invited to worship, while participating in more Bible studies and small groups. They do not invite anyone to worship from the first contact. Jehovah’s Witness do not like to waste time on church shoppers, but only on those who truly are interested. The premium demonstration of interest in the faith is getting prepared for baptism. They place

high expectations for knowledge and moral behavior on each one of their members.

However, the cultural barrier to cross in order to become a Jehovah's Witness is large. In the coming chapters seven and eight, more information and further analysis will be presented.

CHAPTER 6: CENTRO EVANGELÍSTICO DE ZAPOTE

On a main road to the town of *Zapote*, near the presidential palace, just one mile from downtown San José, the *Centro Evangelístico de Zapote* (CEZ) is located (www.centroevangelistico.net). This church belonged to the Assemblies of God, but in 2002 became independent. This church served as the main office of Jimmy Swaggert ministries in Costa Rica back in the 1980s.

CEZ was founded in 1985 by the current senior pastor, his wife, and two American missionaries, Ken and Marci Dalhager. It started as a congregation of 50 people. Today, this congregation has 6,000 people that regularly attend its services. Three years ago, they had fewer than 2,000. Their worship services (Sunday worship at 7:30 a.m., 10:00 a.m., 5:00 p.m.; and Tuesday teaching service at 7:00 p.m.) are all different. At each of these times, traffic becomes a nightmare for neighbors and anyone daring to pass by the area.

As soon as one enters the sanctuary through one of its doors there was a lobby area with what appeared to be a type of small bookstore and an information center. It was difficult to know immediately the purpose of this space because it was not well suited for a bookstore, and although it seemed to be a place to ask to ask questions, information was not readily available unless one asked for it specifically. The church had so many attendees that it may be difficult to figure out who was visiting, and who had been there a little longer. One can buy a CD copy of any of the sermons or teachings, as well as any Christian newspaper, a few books, and other information about the church.

Moving along, one faced a door to enter the sanctuary. There was one usher at the door who opened it and candidly provided a copy of the weekly church bulletin, but he or

she did not say a word to welcome visitors (or anyone else). The bulletin highlights events and topics on offerings, donations, miracles, and anointing.

There were two senior pastors, Hugo Solis and his wife Ruth Solis. The associate pastors were Gerardo Barrantes, Gerardo Jimenez, Iveth Bonilla, Esteban Solis (son of the senior pastors), Luis Lopez, Eduardo Campos, and Carlos Arroyo

The Setting

Finding parking was a total challenge. After the first visit, the researcher decided to park in the streets, over one block away from church. Any non-constructed corner on the property was a parking space. Those who came five minutes before worship was scheduled to begin may not find space and may have to park on the street. There were people watching the cars in the street, but it was a problem for the neighbors' garages. An elementary school functioned there during the week, and on the weekends, the school served as a Sunday school program building. One did not know where to go unless one followed the crowd. There were no ushers in the parking area, and there were no signs anywhere. There was a basketball court area used as parking space for pastors and other important people behind the sanctuary and next to it a cafeteria. There were "no parking" spaces for visitors. On the right of the sanctuary was the elementary school. According to their bulletin they want to begin a construction project, but there did not seem to be any unused space.

There was a series of buildings. The sanctuary was a well-structured, soundproofed auditorium. The sound was excellent and pure but not loud. The music was very good. They have created some of their own worship songs and have recently recorded a CD. The sanctuary seated 1,800 with pews in the lower part and chairs in the

balcony areas. There were pews in the lower part, and chairs in the balcony areas with a weak air-conditioning system. There were four main doors to enter the building, and four more fire exits.

The Meetings

Fifteen minutes before the service started the ushers met. The researcher was there to provide them with copies of the contact sheet, as the ushers were responsible to help the researcher collect the information. It is incredible how at every usher's meeting, and even during the announcements at worship as well, there was always something, such as an activity, an event, a date coming up where there was going to be "blessings coming from God." The ushers spoke about receiving blessings, or "stealing them," meaning that even if the blessing was not for them, they can claim it, or take it by force from God.

Every worship service began with one of the pastors spending at least fifteen minutes urging people to come into worship by calling them to speak in tongues, come to worship, and ask to claim their miracle, etc. There was rhythmical music playing in the background while the pastor loudly exhorted people through repetitive phrases interspersed with speaking in tongues (without interpretation). The focus was on pumping people up to enter into a worship mood that was almost trancelike. People slowly began coming to the altar. Some were kneeling, while others were raising their hands. Meanwhile, an army of fifteen ushers was prepared with offering envelopes, Kleenex, small blankets (in case someone is "slain in the Spirit" and falls in an immodest pose), and miscellaneous visitor information to give away to people. The Pastor said, "intercede in tongues, for in heaven we will speak in tongues, the language of the Kingdom". Then a chorus of people begins humming. The pastor added, "The King is here in His house!

Shout to begin the service!” Praise music begins and twenty-five worshippers have gone to the front of the altar to worship. A praise band and worship leaders lead a time of praise singing. The praise band had a drum set, two electric guitars, one acoustic guitar, one base, keyboard, three in a choir, and the praise leader.

After the third song, another pastor took over leading worship, but by now forty-five people were up front. The pastor said, “say it, sing it. . . He is worthy of praise.” The pastor added, “may the glory of God fill this place. . . . blow Spirit over your people. . . visit your people” while blowing air over the microphone. His role was to motivate, but it appeared to be more “to push” people to experience the Spirit in a supernatural way. Two women nearby the researcher began trembling and waving their hands very fast. Ushers quickly identified her. One usher woman stood behind the one needing assistance (the usher seemed to expect her to fall). One of the Sundays, there was a time for prophecy (something that usually took place only on Tuesday worship). A woman prophesied saying among other things “I will always walk ahead and behind of you, you are great people”, and the congregation applauded the prophecy, while the pastor motivated to applaud harder.

After the fifth song, about forty minutes after the service began, the praise time is over. The senior pastor, who is Costa Rican, speaks with a Mexican or Guatemalan accent. This is a tendency for some pastors in Costa Rica. It may be because there is a famous miracle-worker-pastor-apostle Carlos “Cash” Luna in Guatemala, an apostle of miracles and prosperity. He has a large church in Guatemala. Luna is the model to follow for many neopentecostal leaders in Central America. For the time of offerings the pastor said “what you have in your hand is a seed, not just an envelope. . . ask for a blessing, so

the seed may bring prosperity in all areas of your life.” The moment of announcements was loaded with activities of promises of blessings, and miracles to those who participate. There was no reference, whatsoever, to healings, but the miracles were mostly focused on financial prosperity.

Then, visitors were asked to raise their hands, and receive a bookmark as a *memento* for visiting the church. The sermon then began, and after the sermon there was always an altar calling. If anyone accepted Christ their names were taken and then registered.

During Tuesday night worship service the environment was full of energy. A sense of great expectation fills the setting. People seem to be so glad and excited to be there. The worship began more in a style of a concert, with music more type *Gen X* style, even though, every one was plugged in. “Christ I live for you, I will never be ashamed, take it all, I am giving it to you . . . “how can I hide from you? If your presence in me make me jump. . . comes to transform me . . . I came to surrender, and to declare you are God.”

After five praise songs one of the pastors appeared taking the place of the worship leader, began praying, motivating people to adore the holiness of God, praying in tongues (same dynamic takes place on Sunday worship services). Between the sixth and the seventh song there was a moment of silent prayer for around fifteen minutes. A time for praying in tongues and interpretation, prophecy, holy laughter, and other manifestations of “the Spirit” started. Ushers and pastors began ministering to people who seem to require prayer because of their high emotional need, as well as those who fall may needed

their private parts covered with those small blankets. A couple of prophecies in tongues were presented and interpreted.

The congregation, women first and then men, took their offerings and tithes and put them on the floor of the stage-altar, while instrumental Salsa music (Latin-tropical rhythm) played in the background. As the teaching started the ushers immediately collect the money from the floor and putted it into big baskets, which they took away. Then, the pastor invited visitors to raise their hands, and they received a bookmark as a memento for visiting the church. Next, the sermon began. “What is the meaning of being kings? . . . It comes through the anointing. We must not be miserable. We must walk as kings and dignify ourselves. We must not behave as miserable people.” The teaching continued saying, “this month if you have done something to honor your parents . . . this month if you have done anything for someone in need . . . this month if you have tithed, then you are a candidate to receive a miracle. We must activate the blessings, testing God with our offerings.” A man came up-front and shared a testimony of prosperity. “I received a job, passed an exam and graduated, and someone gave me a used car.” The pastor responded, “God does not exclude anyone . . . ask for your miracle.” He went on to say, “I must have an ethical code and not get involved in commercial businesses, but I must provide blessings for all those who give so the Kingdom may prosper.”

The pastor called those “who need to” to come up-front, saying, “ask for forgiveness from those with whom you are angry. Tithes and offerings are wasted if you are angry.” Interestingly, the timing seemed to be off, since the offering had already been collected and now he was warning people not to be angry or the offering was wasted. Then there was twenty more minutes of praise and *ministration*. *Ministration* was a

period of time during the service when pastors and others intercede for those who seem to be in distress and in need of God. During this time, a huge crowd came to the altar for prayer. Some felt, others spoke in tongues, and others kept praying.

Every Monday through Friday at 6:30 p.m. this church had a paid TV program of an edited version of a weekly worship service that was broadcast on Channel 23 in Costa Rica. It was also linked to TBN in the United States and went out across Latin America. In addition, some of the worship services were available on audio on the Internet.

The Leadership Structure

Pastor Carlos Arroyo, when he was in college, was a leader of a Roman Catholic charismatic youth movement. When he finished college, he distanced himself from this movement. His girlfriend, now his wife, invited him to church and there he accepted Christ. By then he was the executive finance administrator on sales for the Toyota Motor. In 1997, he accepted Christ, and a few months later, he received the baptism of the Spirit and began speaking in tongues. In 1998, he felt the calling to become a pastor. In 2002, he was studying at a Bible institute, but in 2004 he had to abandon such studies because of his job and the heavy load of volunteer work at church. Then, he started a discipleship group at home. After two years, he was a teacher of new believers. Two years later, he was called to be one of the twelve disciples of the senior pastor. In 2003, he, his wife, and another couple were called to become leader of the network of young married couples. Since 2005, he quit his job at the Toyota because he was invited to join the pastoral body at the church.

He oversaw *La Visión* (understood as *The Vision* given by God), a Church Growth program that functions separately from the rest of the church, with a separate

administration and finances. He was the administrator not the pastor of the program. *La Visión* Church Growth program is a copy of a famous discipleship system called *The Model of the 12*, developed by a Colombian pastor Cesar Castellanos. Cash Luna, however, brought *La Visión* to CEZ from Guatemala. It was interesting that a few years after Cesar Castellanos presented his model, one night Cash Luna had a vision where the Holy Spirit gave the same model to him. That is why Cash Luna calls this model *La Visión*.

Pastor Arroyo was studying for MA in biblical studies at ESEPA Seminary. In addition, as all of the pastors, he had to spend a full day a week providing counseling with and without appointments, and he preached once a month in one of the three weekly worship services. He also taught new believers about tithing, baptism, and communion.

Pastor Esteban Solis, son of the senior pastors, accepted Christ as a child in Sunday school and was called by God into pastoral ministry when he was 20 years old. He is coordinating *La Visión*. The purpose of church, for Solis, is based on Matthew 28 and Acts 2.42-47: "To become a healthy church, anointed, dynamic, and committed to God, Costa Rica and the world, and to be a community of love, acceptance, and forgiveness."

Alexandra, main worship leader at CEZ, was born in a Christian home. Her dad was originally from Ecuador and he came as missionary revivalist, following a pastor who came to Costa Rica. He settled in Costa Rica, served as assistant missionary pastor, and met his Costa Rican wife. Through the years he lost his support, quit his assistant pastor role, and decided to start his own business to keep supporting his church. After some moral issues going on in the church, by the age of 10 Alexandra angrily left the

church. She decided to visit CEZ because a friend from church invited her, and the school was located on the grounds of the church. Alexandra's parents decided to attend CEZ as a way to find a change and to support her.

While attending the Christian school of the CEZ, Alexandra joined a praise band that became her passion through middle and high school. While she was participating in the praise band, the pastor of worship insisted that she should join the praise band, then she became the director and voice leader of worship at CEZ. She had been in that position for already five years (but under the worship pastor, and the general director of worship).

Therefore, nine years ago she starting serving at church but was not a Christian. Her conversion was more like a process, she said. "I was angry with God and church and I rebelled against Christianity." After, joining the praise band and theater ministry at CEZ, she started serving and later felt the need to come near to God. During Sunday morning worship she came to the altar asking God to convince her that he was real. She got up empty because she did not feel anything, when she turned around and saw a woman she knew well in a wheel chair getting up and walking, "I turned around again to the altar, felt on my knees, and became a new person."

This church does not have a strategic planning because according to Pastor Carlos Arroyo, the senior pastor had been successful without one and he does not see any sense of having one. Alexandra disagreed saying that there was a strategic planning. "Each leader received a chronogram of activities for the next 6 months."

According to Alexandra the purpose of this church was "evangelistic." The senior pastor was more an evangelist than a pastor. The leadership organization of CEZ had no

deacons or elders, but there was a pastoral body. Hugo Solis disciples a group of leaders, who at the same time disciple others and so on (according to homogenous groups). For Alexandra, committees and a board of administrators, however, ran the church in specific tasks. For pastor Esteban Solis, every four months there is an evaluation of the previous four months of work of the church, and that was how new goals for growth and organization were set up. Considering that, this church qualifies itself as healthy, anointed, dynamic, and committed to God, Costa Rica, and the world. These qualities serve as a mission statement. On organization, below the two senior pastors were six associates. Below them is a group of part-time pastors with a series of “webs or networks” as part of *La Visión*. According to Pastor Solis, “before, we did not give much importance to training lay leaders for ministry; we were not a ‘pastoral’ church and did not have cell groups.” For him, *La Visión* was the best method or program for church growth.

According to Alexandra, since this church implemented *La Visión*, things changed. People did not have any pastoral care, but with *La Visión*, they had pastoral leadership in small groups. At that moment the whole church was more involved in evangelism and discipleship. People were trained and had a clear understanding of *La Visión*. Since we implemented *La Visión* the church had grown a 100% in the last 4-5 years. Only if one joins *La Visión* one receives care. According to Alexandra, there were pros and cons with *La Visión*, but the balance inclines toward the pros. Arroyo and Solis both agree that the idea is to develop leader-disciples. Approximately 2000 (out of those 6000) are part of *La Visión*. According to the pastors interviewed, this was the way to go to become a good member of this church.

Regarding their understanding about the Kingdom, for Arroyo all believers who had declared Christ as Lord are part of the Kingdom. For Solis the Kingdom is justice, peace and joy for those who have decided to live under Christ. It is the will of God accepted and put into practice. The Kingdom is inside anyone who believes in Jesus as savior, and is Lord of his or her life. The universal church is part of the Kingdom, all believer are part of that. It is not an institution; we all are called to take the Gospel to every corner, and being part of that has requisites. Where God reigns, and its kingdom are the believers. Non-believers are out the Kingdom, according to Alexandra.

Assimilation Strategies

The main assimilation strategy for this church was the process they called *La Visión*. The purpose of *La Visión*, as a Church Growth model, was to produce leaders of small groups. The following figure illustrates the process that seemed to be followed as people go through *La Visión*, as it was described by the informants in this case study.

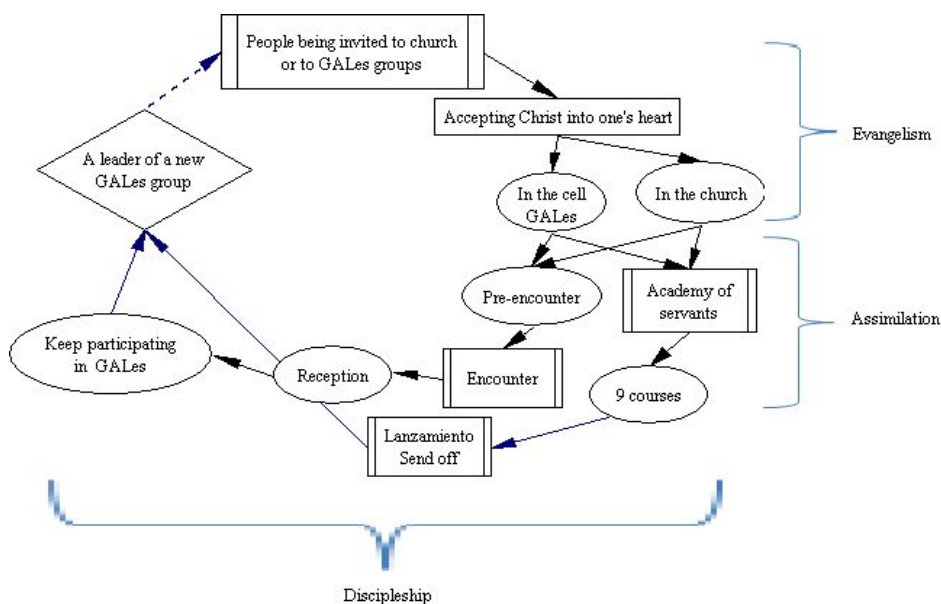


Figure 12. The Process of *La Visión*, a Church Growth model

The process of *La Visión* was as follows.⁷⁵ First, someone accepts Christ at church or in the discipleship home cell groups called *Grupos de Alcance (GALes)* (which means *Reach Out Groups*). Second, after four weeks of observing the person's participation, the group leader evaluates the commitment of the new believer to the church and recommends him or her as a candidate for a spiritual retreat called *El Encuentro*, 'the encounter'. For the candidate to attend an encounter, he or she must attend a pre-encounter, where during four sessions (one hour per week) the candidate is introduced on what is going to be taught and developed during the retreat.

Third, the new believer attends the retreat where the main topics are inner healing, forgiveness, and improving the self-esteem of the person. The retreat is intended to help the person to become spiritually free from any addiction based on demonic oppression (which for them is the cause of all sin and disease), there the need of inner healing, and to receive the Holy Spirit. It is usually a very emotional weekend. Every time the retreatants come back from *El Encuentro*, the church receives them as heroes in a special worship service (known as the reception), as a type of a rite of passage⁷⁶ with associated rituals. Testimonies and songs fill the setting, while family members and friends of each retreatant are guests at this important event. Even non-believing family members and friends are invited to this event, and it is intended to be a witness to them. After the *encuentro* and the reception, post-encounter meetings follow. Over a period of three months, one hour per week, the participants will be taught on how to overcome temptation, to overcome the attacks of the devil, and to deal with the spirit world.

After this event, two structures provide follow up for the new believer. First, there is a set of nine courses called "The Academy of Servants," and second the *GAL* groups or

GALes. Each new believer is required to take the first course in the Academy called “Faith Foundations,” which is a weekly course that meets for a month and teaches the foundations of Christianity. This course is usually taken immediately after *El Encuentro*, but it may be taken before. After *El Encuentro*, the person is expected to attend the remaining courses in the Academy. These span a period of eight months and include basic doctrinal and Bible courses. They meet in classrooms at different times of the day, once a week for two hours. Each participant pays \$15 (USD) per course (and there are nine courses total). The graduation for this academy takes place in another retreat, “*El Lanzamiento*” (meaning The Send-off. Again, follows a *Rite de Passage*) where retreatants receive a special anointment by the pastors to win people to Christ. Now, they can become leaders of new *GALes* groups, which work like small groups/house churches.

The second structure is the *GALes* groups, which are discipleship and outreach groups that meet once a week in homes and are composed of people with similar demographic characteristics. Every new believer is required to join a *GAL* group, if they are not already a part of one through which they became a believer. A married couple leads each home group preferably. The idea is that each participant of these groups that has graduated from the academy will soon start a new group in their home. Each one of these groups is part of a larger network. The center of the network is the senior pastors and their closest disciples. Those disciples also have their disciples, and so on.

There were five networks, each one led by part time pastoral couples. First, there is a “single moms under thirty-six years old” network. Second, it was the “young couples” network. Third, the “over forty year old couples” and “divorced people over thirty-six years old” had a network. Fourth, there was the “twenty to thirty-six year old

university/singles” network. Fifth, there was the “teen’s network” of members under twenty years old. According to the pastors, the idea was to move a new believer from being a *recipient* into being a *giver* in the life of the church. The goal was that each believer can develop his/her own “12 disciples” as Christ did, and consequently the church will multiply. This model had been in place at this church since 2002.

Pastor Solis recognizes that an area that needs improvement was visitor follow up. “We follow up with those who pray the salvation prayer after the sermon, rather than those who are simply identified as visitors. We have had the idea to give each visitor an evaluation survey about the worship service and ask for their data so that we could contact them, but we have not done this yet.” Most of the assimilation takes place in the *GALes* groups, which means that the visitor has to take the next step him/herself), and where new people can easily build friendships. Outside these groups, assimilation is difficult. Anyone could join this church if they have accepted Christ at worship or in *GALes*. After they have provided basic biographical data, they were then phoned and guided on how to become involved in *La Visión*.

Alexandra says, “If I could change *La Visión*, I would create more flexibility because some leaders had high expectations and were legalistic about the process. Those who had left the church had done so because they felt strangled. It depended on how the leaders handled the issue.” The structure was not flexible enough for some whose comments and expectations for change were not well received. Decisions were made at the top.

What marks the difference of this church from any other was the “praise music” because it was good. According to Arroyo, what identifies this church from any other

church, was the passion people have to praise God. For these leaders *La Visión* sought to transform church people from a consumer to a supplier, a leader in the church, to reach to nonbeliever, and to impact society (this church also supports financially a ministry for children at risk, and provides local mission).

Solis, however, said that what differentiated this church from any other “is the passion for God, evangelism and the movement of the Holy Spirit.” He said, “We are a church of processes not of events. We do not seek activities but to provide a holistic growth to each believer.” This church wanted people to know about God, to value the importance of becoming a supplier, and to feel that this local congregation was home, according to Pastor Arroyo. The secret for the growth of this church was the passion for God and to the nonbelievers. Therefore, any new believer has the chance to join *La Visión* and there become assimilated.

A visitor, however, may find himself or herself totally lost. In order to even receive an invitation to join *La Visión*, the visitor must become a regular attender, must be self-motivated and must not be afraid to push ahead in the program. Alexandra added, “the secret of the growth of CEZ has been *La Visión*.” How people were contacted and cared for is through *La Visión*, however this also narrows the gateway into the church. Alexandra added “for anyone who wants to become a good member and leader in this church, that person has to go through *La Visión*. If you want to join us have to join *La Visión*, if you do not like it, find another church. *La Visión* facilitates the process. That is the main objective of *La Visión*! If you are not in *La Visión*, you cannot serve in any ministry.”

As words of wisdom, Arroyo said, “accept Christ and join *La Visión*. Words of wisdom for any visitor at church, for Alexandra, were “nobody will judge your appearance. We believe in the work God can do inside you. This is a place you can grow in God, and where people will teach you, train you, and care for you.” In other words, the best thing a visitor can do was follow the process and join *La Visión*. This church was a neopentecostal church, and for those who are nonpentecostal may not feel at home. For Alexandra, this church is mostly for high middle class folks (many young people, professionals, and young families). Older people do not click that easily, because we have young pastors leading evangelism and discipleship. There is an openness for young people to serve and be creative.

Those Being Assimilated

Both Silvia and Rebeca were Costa Ricans by birth and came to CEZ from a Roman Catholic background. That is, this was the first evangelical church they have visited. Silvia was a kindergarten teacher in her mid twenties and single, while Rebeca was married with children, a mom at home, and in her early thirties. Silvia was more eloquent than Rebeca while answering the questions. They came to church invited by family members already deeply involved in CEZ. Both of them, however, live approximately one hour from church, which is a long distance from church, considering that they depended on their family members to take them to church. The reason they have not been assimilated completely into “*La Visión*” was that they had not gone up front yet and accepted Christ publicly.

On the range of 1 to 10, both Rebeca and Silvia selected a 7 as a way to consider themselves part of the church, even though, in the last 6 months they both had not being

able to develop close friends, “only one, maybe” in the case of Rebeca. Nobody had explained to them, however, the process that they had to go through to become members of this church. As new Christians, Silvia and Rebeca equated their relationship with God as attending church on either Tuesdays or Sundays. Attending church had helped them both to grow deep in their faith. For instance, what Silvia would like to do for God in this church in the near future is “only to participate in the *GALes*.” While what Rebeca would like to do for God at this church was to visit this church as often as she could.

Rebeca said “that those things about God were not important in her life” and that she was more superficial regarding spiritual things. Going to church for her was “an empty habit, going only for the sake of going, but now visiting this church has more meaning.” She said that she tried to be a new person in this church, and her life had new meaning. “When I have problems I feel like leaving everything behind and run away, but now I ask God for help and for peace in order to continue.” She considers that her life has changed, mostly in the way she relates to her husband, being now more communicative and assertive and not so proud. She was also more forgiving with her extended family. She can notice when she was about to sin.

Rebeca’s brother once invited her to visit CEZ. She visited and liked it but that church was about 1 hour in distance in bad traffic, and her husband does not like to go to church. Then, Rebeca’s brother-in-law invited her to the same church. Since she had been visiting, the sermons provided her with motivation to live the Christian life, and that had kept her visiting this church.

Silvia, on the other hand, before visiting CEZ, used to suffer from mild depressions, which affected her way of relating to friends and family members. Now she

felt, however, more motivated and happy. Even more, she considered herself a new person in Christ and felt very good participating in this church. Her life had new meaning. “Nobody has to wake me up to go to church. I motivate myself to go.” Silvia grew up Roman Catholic and that was the only church she visited in her whole life until she began attending CEZ. Her brother-in-law and her sister invited her. She came because she was curious but then continued attending.

The idea that “in this church, that nobody would get into my business attracted me a lot,” said Silvia. That was the phrase Silvia uses to describe this church and to differentiate this church from others. “What calls my attention in this church is that there are men with piercing, people wearing tattoos, long hair, and those with weird ways of dressing up are not bothered by others to change these manners. This is the success of this church, attracting so many young people, allowing them to be themselves, letting them through time experience change, feeling free to attend to a place where nobody harasses you for being who you are.” On the matter of what this group should continue doing to please God, Silvia said “I believe that they do things well, nothing else than being careful not to obligate new people to do things they do not feel prepared to do.” Rebeca, on the other hand, described this church as “a beautiful building, great sermons that fills you, wonderful music, everything is beautiful and makes you feel close to God, something I did not used to feel before.”

On the subject of values of the group she perceives them from the pastor in his teachings and sermons. What she liked the most and had helped her to grow spiritually in this church were the sermons. What she liked least was to see how mothers with babies who cry or were distracting were asked to leave the sanctuary and move to the lobby of

the church where, through TV, they could participate in worship. This was important to the family because her niece was a baby. Something that almost motivated not to comeback was during her first visit, when a Mexican pastor did not come to preach but to cause manifestations of the Spirit. “People were euphoric, falling, dancing, and speaking in different languages. It was scary.” In the case of Silvia, in the beginning, something that kept her from attending this church was that she felt obligated to raise her hands and stand for long periods. “When someone comes from a different religion like the Roman Catholic Church (raising hands and standing for long periods of time) is not frequent and it is a difficult step. I believe one needs to do these things in a progressive way, not being obligated during the first time one visits.”

To grow deeply in her spiritual life, Rebeca felt that she needed more faith. To please God she felt she must continue visiting church and listening to God’s word and expressing solidarity to others. Rebeca felt very good attending this church and she felt the need to integrate herself more in the life of the church and its different groups. The limitations she confronted were the long distance between her home and church, that there was no *GAL* group in her town; her husband was not motivated to attend church, and her two small children. She had been thinking about visiting another church nearby, but she liked CEZ. She did not attend any *GAL*, and had not been invited to attend any *El Encuentro*.

“I love the praise songs, the sermons, and when they call for people to come up front for prayer. However, I like less the parking lot, which is so uncomfortable,” said Rebeca. She wished the sermons were longer and that the pastors would remain. “The manifestations of the Spirit I see as weird and still have questions about it.” In the last six

months, she had been able to develop only one close friend. She said that she was not very “clingy”, and besides her brother-in-law, his wife, and mother-in-law visited this church with her.

Rebeca would like to be like her evangelical aunt, or her grandma was also evangelical, but nobody from church serves as a model necessarily. Silvia had found models to follow at church. One was, Pastor Iveth (the woman pastor of children), “and of course, Hugo Solis (Senior Pastor) because I like his charisma.” Silvia believed that something that should never change in this church is the pastoral staff. She felt that she had been growing spiritually because “I’ve learned many new things.” According to Silvia someone mature in the faith in this group was someone wise, with a big projection of life, and a vision of a dignified life in God. While for Rebeca someone mature in the faith in this church was someone mature, happy, shiny, and helping others.

About sharing the faith with others, neither of them was able to understand the implications. Silvia believed that preaching with the example was enough for sharing one’s faith. “I have shared with some of my dear friends how good I feel in this church, and more than one has felt as curious I did when I came for the first time to church.” For Rebeca it was important to testify and to invite people to church, something she had done with close girl friends.

The slogan of this church, according to Silvia, was “where the passion is lived,” and she believed that it was true. She did not know, however, the mission statement of the church. Rebeca was also not able to recall either. “What I do remember is that this is the year of realizations,” (or *the year of resolutions*) something that the church had been promoting.

One lesson she remembered that impacted her deeply was “one time the pastor asked us ‘to sow’ (which implies to make a promise or a vow usually with money as an offering, in exchange the donor receives a miracle or a response from God) and to pray for something one desires. I was going through a crisis in my relationship, however, and I prayed for that, and in less than a month that relationship was broken and ended. The pastor said that God allows these things for us to learn from our mistakes, and that sometimes we have to go through the same test two times to learn not to fall into the same errors.” For Rebeca there had been certain topics she remembered on marriage and couples’ life, companionship, fidelity, and the sermon from the children’s day.

Concerning what they have learned in this church about how a Christian person is different from any other person, they both believed that they were in the process of growth. “It is not easy to leave behind all that that was inculcated since one was born, and one has practiced for over 26 years, and in only one night by the next morning change. However, I believe I am doing it well, one-step at a time. In this church I’ve learned to strengthen my faith and to give thanks to God before eating each meal,” believed Silvia. Silvia saw her future in this church in a positive way, as a happy and active member of this group. In the next year, she saw herself continuing the process of growth that she had been experiencing. Rebeca saw herself as full member of this church, attending with her husband and children.

Finally, there were often obstacles in their present life that at times did not allow them to grow in their faith. Silvia described this by stating that, “my heart was still with the Roman Catholic Church, and in the beginning I felt like a traitor.” While for Rebeca

were personal fears and passivity (she felt afraid of going up front and accept Christ), and she lacked time to participate at church.

Those Who Left the Church

Yorlen Rodriguez, a psychologist, left this church with her husband after being “pastors” of a *GAL* ministry. She did not become a Christian at this church. Before attending CEZ, she attended two other churches. At the time, she had no local church and was invited to come to this church for an activity (a famous miracle worker-pastor from Mexico). She liked the organization and the image of the church and decided with her husband to stay and join.

She believed that this church “has a good evangelistic capacity, but a terrible way of discipleship.” She believed that “many find here a social place to stay and develop relationships. Others find a place that provides them with power.” This made the process of assimilation slow because the requisites to become part of *La Visión* were a high commitment. *La Visión* was supposed to become above everything and anything, even above family dynamics, as senior pastor once said in a sermon, according to Yorlen. That was why she considered she was “pseudodisciplined” at this church.

According to Yolen, what attracts people to this church was the worship and the image the church in the beginning shows to people [the organization it appears to have]. What repelled people from this church was the abuse by engaging in *La Visión*, which was demanding. She said, “there are the *GALes* which are cell evangelistic groups at home. The work is hard.” She and her husband were pastoring a group like this. She went on: “We have to invite people, evangelize them, and consolidate their attendance. When one can achieve taking them to an *encuentro*, then they are placed in *La Visión*.” These

participants began to be highly required to do many things, including giving money, and felt burdened by a load of activities that they could not fulfill. Because of such heavy requirements, participants often felt incapable of fulfilling them. Therefore, they had to leave because they were not part of the vision of the church; essentially, they were unofficially expelled by the congregation.

She left this church because she considered that “this church abuses people.” “Power is everything, the figure of the pastor, the dynamics, the structure of the church is oriented to idealize the pastors, as semigods.” According to Yorlen from the top-down power was valued in that way. “When *La Visión* started, one of its aspects was to watch for the souls and to grow. A medium to accomplish that vision is *La Visión*.” When *La Visión* as Church Growth model started, those who started groups at home were named “pastors.” That was the starting point of a series of emotional and spiritual abuses to their disciples. After this experience, the pastors decided to improve the system by providing some supervision and better training of these “pastors.” When she and her husband decided to leave, not one of the leaders or pastors of the church paid them a visit, phone call, or called them for a conversation. She felt her spiritual life was stagnated and being hurt.

She left, but says that she is not hurt but worried about the way people were being abused at this church. At the moment “I was hurt and felt a big deception.” The church she looked for, (she found one already) is one with a healthy doctrine, an acceptable way to praise God, and a way to motivate relationships among its members. What helped her was to find spaces for healing, like talking to wise people and being counseled, created specific times with God, and finding a way to heal what happened.

Yorleny is another person who deserted this church. She said that this church always called her attention because of the TV broadcast. She attended a small group but “I always wanted to attend that big church so cool.” She started attending CEZ and joining the activities. Since then, she had joined the church and started participating in *La Visión*. But she mentioned that “the vision of the church” [*La Visión*] began to create within her mixed feelings. It was a one-full year of struggle within her to stay or leave the church.

She mentioned that by joining the Model of Jesus, the *GALes* (cell groups at homes) and the worship services, “I got separated from my family. I was always in church. I was not spending time with my family. I used to come home around midnight, and then had to work next day. Because, if you are not in [*La Visión*], you are out of the church.” Thus, conflicts with her family started.

Then, she decided to study theology at a Seminary. The pressure rose, and she was not able to attend certain church activities as she was used to do. That meant receiving a call from her immediate pastor because by then she was one of the youth leaders. “I had to take a seat within the first pews of the church (where church leaders have their spots), but I liked to sit up in the balcony, but that was distasteful for my *GAI* group leaders. The second semester studying at a Seminary, and chatting with one of her leaders about not having much time, her leader told her that a new rule at church was that anyone must at least register for and attend one of the courses at church [as part of *La Visión*]. If she does not do this, the leaders of the church will not provide her with *cobertura* (literally translated as “coverage”). This “coverage” is understood by this group of people to be a type of “spiritual protection,” as if they had a spiritual umbrella

that protects the person against the everyday attacks from the Devil and demons. Not having this protection meant that you were open to any bad luck or disgrace that may happened to you. That is, the person is open to receive evil and not capable of receiving blessings or miracles. Only certain leaders can provide this *cobertura*.

So, the program of *La Visión* was very demanding and she was upset. Even more, one time she was asked to provide her Costa Rican I.D. number (which is like the U.S. social security number), and she did so. Then she thought, “with this number they can verify many personal things, like income, income taxes, credit reports, debts, and more.” After that she became very upset, and that was the straw the broke the camel’s back. “I do not like *La Visión*; I am not a slave of the church. We are all members of one body, and there should not be separations.”

“Simply, one day I thought, I am not going to that church anymore, and asked God direction for guidance, about where else to go, and not stop congregating.” After she left “many of those I called friends disappeared because I was not part of *La Visión*.” She was hurt in the beginning but was able to find guidance in the Scriptures, and from friends from a different church that helped her in the healing process, and provided her with friendship. “God was always there and did not let me make a bad decision.” She did not felt abandoned by God and was able to heal. But, “I miss nice, real people who once blessed me and loved me. I still have some friends there.”

Conclusion

This is the largest of all of the churches in this study, and among the largest churches in San Jose. This congregation is as passionate as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and holds similar high expectations, but CEZ does not place as much emphasis on supervising

the moral life of the people. First, monitoring 6,000 attendees would be difficult, and second, only one third are fully involved in *La Visión*. We could also say that this church in its way of doing and being church is the antithesis of the model that *Vida Abundante* (nonpentecostal megachurch) represents. That is, *Vida Abundante* opposes *La Visión* and prosperity theology, and it is anti-pentecostal.

What is the secret to the growth of this congregation? *La Visión*, as a model for Church Growth, has provided phenomenal growth for this congregation. However, prosperity theology and an self-worshipping leadership system had also been a part of this concoction of growth. The authority of this church was centered around the holy family: father, son, and holy mother, the founders of this congregation. *La Visión* system was the most common and famous Church Growth system among mainly Pentecostal and mostly neopentecostal churches in Central America. This was one of the first churches in Costa Rica to adapt this system imported from Guatemala. This Church Growth system sounds good, but looking at it closely one realizes the opposite: “Not all growing churches are healthy.” This statement will be analyzed in the coming chapters.

Just like *Vida Abundante*, this congregation is made up of high middle class, professional people. The port of entry (assimilation start point) of this congregation seemed to be the sermons preached by its famous preachers, and then *La Visión*. These sermons were always around topics of prosperity and miracles. It is true that sermons worked, in a short term, for the formation of a new believer. After a while, the new believer or current visitor began feeling the need for more spiritual nourishment. The only way, however, to be assimilated in this congregation was by going up front, after the

sermon, and accepting Christ. If one is a visitor, the system does not inform you of what steps to take to get involved in *La Visión*.

CHAPTER 7: ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDIES

In this chapter, the previous four case studies will be analyzed according to their differences and commonalities. All cases were selected from within the urban metropolitan area of San José, Costa Rica. The largest of all selected religious groups, and the fastest growing, is *Centro Evangelístico de Zapote* (CEZ) with a weekly attendance of 6,000 people. The majority of Pentecostal churches in Costa Rica, mostly neopentecostals, are more and more following *La Visión* as a model for Church Growth. *Vida Abundante* (VA) is one of the few mega-non-pentecostal churches in the country. In other words, in CEZ and VA, we are able to examine two contrasting models of fast-growing megachurches in Costa Rica.

Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) represent a congregation with a weekend attendance of no more than 75 people, but this group is *unique*. That is, it is difficult to compare with others of its size because it is not an evangelical congregation as are the other three groups. Lastly, the House Church (HC) with a weekend attendance of 20 people is the smallest of all. It may represent, however, a new movement of house churches that it is taking strength in Costa Rica.

The following chart presents an analytical grid of how this chapter is structured:

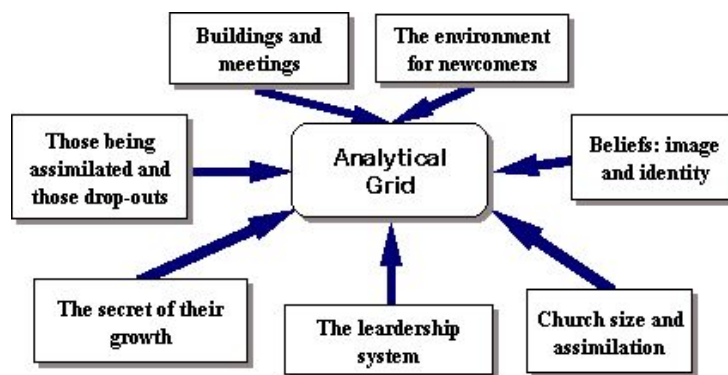


Figure 13. Analytical Grid for Chapter 7

The Settings and Meetings

All religious groups had greeters at the doors, but among the evangelicals they functioned more like ushers providing information, such as handing out the church's bulletin. CEZ had a welcome center, but it was the place where the church secretaries met to chat with the people they knew. At CEZ and VA, there were no signs to guide the visitor, to either guest parking spaces or guest seating areas. Navigating within the buildings of those megachurches was difficult. The HC did not have any signs, and the only reason someone could get there was by being personally invited. The JW looked like any other evangelical neighborhood church. The first time the researcher visited the JW, one usher came and warmly asked about the visit, and the leaders were quickly informed of my presence. JW are not used to receiving *walk-ins*.

The megachurches were the only ones trying to make order out of their eternal construction chaos where they have been immersed for years. They were not expecting to grow that much, and they were trying to buy properties from their neighbors, and making every inch available for parking and expanding their sanctuary. They seemed to be doing the best they could with the space they had. The CEZ setting was the best of all

in terms of its sound quality and aesthetics. The parking lot, however, was its weakness. The worst setting for sound and aesthetics was VA, but they did have space to build something new. Their parking lot was spacious. JW did not have a parking lot. There were only parking spaces alongside the streets. Nevertheless, the large majority of the worshipers did not have enough income to own a car. They traveled to church by public transportation.

Like any other culture, congregations invent and arrange material objects, like buildings, in order to communicate patterns of activities, and values and assumptions about God, nature, humanity, itself, and others (Ammerman 1997, 59). Paying attention to the arrangements and use of artifacts can help us in understanding the group's identity and its relationship to the world.

In this study, an overall evaluation of the setting of worship shows that all were uncomfortable to visit and difficult to navigate. The material culture of these churches was not welcoming. As a result, visitors had to struggle with the cultural barriers in order to worship. That is, the setting of these congregations did not have orientation signs and were not designed to be visitor friendly. It is interesting how churches borrow their aesthetics from their surrounding larger culture because all these churches reflected the urban chaos that it is affecting San José.

The evangelical groups welcomed visitors just as they would be welcomed into a stadium. None of them provided follow up with visitors. While church growth experts have claimed that "what we do with people in the weeks immediately after they join the church is crucial" (Hunter 1979, 143), these churches seemed to ignore this dictum.

This is common among evangelicals in Costa Rica, and it is based on a traditional evangelistic method many Costa Ricans still follow. They have been told that they should invite people to church in order to evangelize them. However, in most cases, they are inviting people to a church that is not friendly to visitors, unless those visitors already know how to behave at church and are tolerant of a lack of hospitality. This is very ineffective when inviting nonbelievers to church. Even if the person who invites tries to help the guest to navigate and orientate around the church, the church as a whole is not hospitable. Thus, Costa Rican evangelicals have essentially created a cultural barrier between themselves and unbelievers. This barrier is difficult to bridge for nonbelievers, and the local church seems to be unwilling, or does not know how, to help nonbelievers navigate and understand “church culture.” Everybody assumes that anyone who visits should know where to park, how to navigate the facilities, where to sit, and how to behave at church. The church seems to be for Christians only. The churches in this study were not prepared to receive visitors even when their own members were bringing them to the church.

All these religious groups were active. In addition to their weekend activities, they organized weekly training events. Evangelicals centered their events within their temples for their own people, but only the JW were active outside their Kingdom Hall a good portion of their time. All evangelical groups were financially participating in some kind of social relief activities, like providing funding to needy people, in drug rehabilitation, and such. Only VA provided some kind of assistance support for families in need, but it was a ministry that sought funds from outside the church. Even so, those church leaders

were not able to theologically integrate those relief activities with their evangelical heritage.

Most megachurches boasted about having private elementary and middle schools during the week at their grounds. Those Christian private schools were bilingual and for high middle class folks who can pay their child's tuition in dollars. Each of the megachurch pastors saw those schools, however, as a great service of holistic ministry to their communities. VA also receives some financial support from the Willow Creek church in Illinois. JW had to maintain itself, as did the HC. The wealthiest of all churches was CEZ. They even sent money to Guatemala to support the ministry of their apostle, Carlos "Cash" Luna, who provides them with *cobertura*.

Let us remember that for VA church, in order to become a member of the family, one needs only to keep attending and join any ministry, as if assimilation would be automatic. In the CEZ, one has to go through each one of the steps of *La Visión*. If that does not happen, one is excommunicated. JW has the highest expectations on behavior and participation. Becoming a JW is a huge cultural barrier to cross for many people. One needs to commit to an average of 10 hours of preaching each week and at least attend three different activities each week. For HC the process of membership is not as clear. A person declares his/her intent to join, then makes a commitment to contribute to the funds and cooperate in to the activities of the group. In other words, becoming a member at CEZ and the JW seems to be more serious than the other two groups because each of the two has requirements for those who commit as members.

The Environment for Newcomers

From the perspective of a newcomer, the environment at VA is anonymous in that there is not much interaction among those who attend, but there is an inner section of the church where pastors, their families, and leaders sit and interact among themselves. Visiting this church is like going to a theater, but during the sermon and praise songs the environment does turn a bit warmer. Pastoral care at all levels is non-existent, so attendees seem more like visitors to a mall (metaphorically speaking). The front doors, as well as the back doors, are wide open, and there seems to be no willingness to close any door because the flow of people is constant. At CEZ, if one pays attention, one notices who belongs, who is beginning to belong, and who does not belong. That is, the insiders do interact among themselves at church and during other days of the week because of their system of Church Growth (*La Visión*). Pastoral care exists only in the small groups, for those who have been assimilated by the channels that *La Visión* provides.⁷⁷ However, the pastors are the main figures, and people seemed to develop a dependence on their leaders.

The interaction at the HC is not really warm and welcoming to the visitor. It seems like they have spent many years together and do not know how to assimilate new people, or they may think it is the job of the pastor to do it. They are not used to receiving many visitors and there lies the reason. A visitor feels cramped by the physical space and marginalized by the social environment. Even though the size of the church would allow for a better pastoral care, it does not happen.

Meanwhile, at the JW one does not relax during worship, as the interaction is very formal and stiff. You feel that you are an outsider. People are warm, but you know that

their motive is to proselyte you. Visitation and care to those interested in this faith are part of their dynamics during weekdays.

Beliefs: Image, and Identity

These groups have an image to project. This image works like their identity, which describes who they are and who they are not, a culture that has to be learned. Advertising is important but alone will not produce growth. The JW goes into the world home by home to reach out to the unchurched, showing off their religious passion and presence in the streets. The megachurch pastors broadcast their services and have become TV personalities. CEZ works with TBN-Enlace for all Latin America and the rest of the evangelical world, while VA works with a public television station at the national level. The House church, on the other hand, has an image but they seem not to be capable of projecting it outside themselves.

Each church's narrative reflects their beliefs. CEZ is 'prosperity gospel' oriented, seeking to incorporate people into its system *La Visión*. A good member of this congregation learns how to become a miracle hunter, constantly seeking miracles of prosperity. VA is about pop-psychology teachings, and their business is about strengthening families. A good member at VA would know more about *self-help* than the Holy Scriptures. Finally, JW is all about expecting the *parousia*, and seeking to rescue people from Satan's system that controls this world. A good Jehovah's Witness member seeks to be rescued from this world before the end of times.

What these churches advertise varies. VA advertises a family oriented church; CEZ advertises a place to reach out for a miracle of prosperity; JW advertises a safe haven and salvation from the evil world; and HC advertises how to become disciples of

Jesus. Megachurches are the only ones that provide programs for all age groups that work as entry points, because “the greater the number of entry points, the greater the number of people who will be attracted” (Bast 1998, 53). Also, they advertise their worship events, something that the JW do not do, and the megachurches have a better spectacle to offer.

Megachurches and JW also have a positive image of themselves. This positive JW image may motivate them to attract or reach out to others because they seem to have something exclusive to offer which is that they are *the organization of Jehovah*. They have enthusiastic and challenging leaders, and because of their size, major conflicts are not noticeable. For instance, CEZ and JW offer small group opportunities, and CEZ and VA offer some social assistance ministry to their communities.

In the case of newcomers, they need to relate their autobiographical stories with the stories of local churches found in the Scriptures or from other cultures. Language and its use is a necessary tool that helps us understand how humans apprehend reality and interpret their social structure. Every religious group has a particular culture that it needs to transmit to newcomers. This culture describes what is unique and special about a particular image of a religious group.

The interviews and participant observations allow the researcher to discover within sermon themes, and interviews, the church’s image, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

VA has generated a message that said, “God can help you, and heal your family.” Their emphasis is on family issues and self-help sees it as God’s purpose. This information came out of the sermon themes based on popular Psychology. They were how to improve your communication, how to be assertive, how to communicate with

your teenagers, how to live a happy life, and how to administrate your finances. It was amazing, for the researcher, how the biblical text was sacrificed with this emphasis on pop psychology. The Scriptures were used to back up the psychological topics of sermons. This church identifies itself as “common people, casual, non religious, (meaning non liturgical)” people. As one of the pastors of VA said, “our church is not like the neopentecostal ones (e.g., CEZ) that abuse peoples’ finances.” This church has been able to generate its image as being opposed to the neopentecostal congregations.

The image of VA is a type of clinic where anyone can find healing and become a member of the family. Other issues of their identity, according to the leaders, are “seeker sensitive,” “holistic mission,” “cross-cultural missions,” and “training to other churches,” but none of them were topically or symbolically developed during the worship services where the researcher was present, and none of the informants mentioned them. Values of the congregation mentioned by the pastors were honesty, integrity, leadership formation, service, humility, and openness. Nevertheless, the drop-out informants rejected these values as false in the practices of the church. Another characteristic of this congregation, according to one of the pastors, is that this church is a place of refuge and restoration. This could be true from the point of view of those who come hurt and burn out from neopentecostal churches. In a general way, it could be said, that VA has developed its image as being opposite to neopentecostal churches that highlight divine apostleship, prosperity theology, spiritual coverage from demonic attacks, and special blessings. The problem here with VA, is that it says, “We are not like them” but its leaders are not sure who they would be if the other wouldn’t be around.

What identifies HC is “come and grow and live a practical faith.” The HC presented itself very simply, “We can live a practical Christianity, the Holy Spirit empowers us to do so,” and added, “the study of Scriptures is important.” Explicitly the pastor said, “our purpose is to grow ourselves in a practical life, then reach others, for God’s kingdom.” The problem with this purpose statement is that if the people are not feeling they are living a practical Christian life, then they will not reach out to others.

Their identity, however, was very weak because when it was explained to the researcher, it was very vague. In the last three years, this group has not grown and the people are the same founding members. They seemed un-motivated to invite others, and if they do invite, they are not warm to the visitors, unless the visitor shows the same socioeconomic level. Visitors seem to not assimilate to the congregation and members do not invite others to church. Three families are the base of this congregation, and the pastor wonders if they are doing things right. It seems that this might be the right image of this congregation. The image of this church is like a small group, acting like they are bigger and where members can grow in faith and practical Christianity. They seem not go to deeper in discipleship, and mission is not existent, however. The pastor talked about the kingdom of God, but even his neighbors may not be aware that there is a small church meeting there every Sunday.

The JW see themselves this way: “We are the People of God; our eternal life is secure if our behavior is right.” We have moral responsibilities, we have to expand God’s kingdom through preaching’. Their identity sounds strong because they understand themselves as being right, while the other religious groups are wrong and lost. That is, for them there are two kinds of people: ‘Those who are in the organization of Jehovah, and

those who are not in yet, and are out of God's kingdom'. Their worldview tells them that the world is in total chaos, and they should reject everything that comes from the world, which is governed by Satan. The organization of Jehovah is right, and it is trying to rescue from the world anyone willing to listen that the end of the world is near. Strict right behavior and high expectations describes the JW. The image of this group is of a bunker, and you leave it only to rescue those being perished, while waiting for the end of the world.

CEZ presents its image this way: 'Come and receive the power to live a prosperous, blessed, and victorious life'. Their emphasis is on prosperity, miracles, signs of the Spirit, and lives changed through the Spirit's power. Their identity is described as follows, 'we are blessed and prospered church and that is why we do and have what you see', meaning Church Growth and prosperity. This church seeks to get everyone involved in becoming house-pastor-leaders, as *La Visión* Church Growth program commands them to do.

For the sake of prosperity, the hermeneutical work of the sermons and teaching was a marvelous example of creativity. They preached prosperity from biblical passages that had nothing to do with prosperity (i.e., eisegesis). Somehow, people want to hear that. Middle class professionals may want to prosper in a society where prosperity is difficult. The most committed members of this church even have two jobs, one of them their own small or micro enterprise. They seemed to earn well and for sure spend well. They have to show that they are prosperous, because if they are not, something wrong is going on in their spiritual life. In their theological thinking, the Lord blesses those who pact money with God. That is, they give a good offering to church as a way to activate God's blessings. Thus, people are like programmed to become miracle hunters.

The image of this church is a type of wonderland where your dreams can come true because God wants to bless everyone, but everyone needs to discover the laws of prosperity. Prosperity theology and the high expectations of *La Visión*, and the giving and receiving money as blessings from God, become a discourse that for some does not last too long.

Church Size and Assimilation

The assimilation of newcomers into a congregation will vary depending on its size. That is, this has to do with assimilation styles; it does not mean that smaller churches do better than larger churches or vice versa. For instance, in a small “family size church” a newcomer enters by adoption into the family, and only the patriarch or matriarch will perform that task, because the role of the pastor in these matters is not important. In a medium size church, “the pastor is not only the glue which holds the congregation together, but also the key for new members to become incorporated into the life of the church” (Bast 1988, 129). For larger churches, the pastor no longer can play the primary role in incorporating newcomers. The larger the church, the more important it is to have many ports of entry, such as different programs. “An effective approach to new member incorporation in the larger church will involve acquainting the newcomer with the people and programs of the church” (Bast 1988, 131).

In our case we have HC that works as a family church, “a single-cell church or ‘intimate community’ functions like a large family and is almost always controlled by a strong parental figure or two, commonly referred to as the church matriarch or patriarch—the head of the family” (Braden 1987, 12). The problem with assimilating issues of this small church is that “the church does the choosing more than the new

person does” (Oswald and Leas 1997, 32). Joining a church of this size is like “marrying into a clan.”⁷⁸

Considering that the demographics of this congregation are about extended families, and professional business people. Anyone who is not like them may feel outside, like in the case of the maid of Maria Eugenia. “Incorporation in this church requires a great deal of intentional effort, and usually it doesn’t happen quickly” (Braden 1987, 13). Where is the role of the pastor regarding assimilation in a small church? “The pastor of a congregation this size is hardly ever the head of the congregation” (Braden 1987, 12). In other words, besides working as a mentor and a friend, the pastor does not have the power to admit the newcomer into the family. The laity in small churches has the power to include or exclude anyone.⁷⁹

The JW, in McIntosh perspective, is a small church as well, but it really works as a medium size church. Don Uriel, leader of this congregation, was involved in all the activities of the group. Everyone would expect him to supervise any newcomer, such as it was in the case of the researcher. For instance, he knew about those who he has not met yet but were being taken care and brought to the Kingdom Hall by others. The elders of this congregation replace the several matriarchs/patriarchs of the extended family church. But let us remember that assimilation in the JW is totally different from the evangelical churches.

Finally, we have CEZ and VA, both megachurches. A church of this size may have many ports of entry, but the best way to assimilate is via small groups. Sermons, however, have been the best port of entry for assimilation, but many ports need to function at the same time. On the one hand, for CEZ, *La Visión* provided a good way of

assimilation, considering its limitations. On the other hand, VA only had the sermons, no small groups, and thus no way to provide care to newcomers.

The evangelical churches in this study recognized that need to improve the assimilation of visitors, but months have passed and they have not done much to overcome such weakness. Is this telling something about the culture of the evangelical churches in Costa Rica?

The Leadership System

Leaders play an important role in shaping the culture of each congregation. It is the culture of a congregation that determines a good or bad assimilation system. That is, if a congregation values hospitality as a part of its culture, it will do its best to be hospitable to newcomers, thus assimilating them properly. In our case studies, however, the leadership seems to have a business-oriented agenda (though one pastor denied this).

The *senior* pastors of all these congregations were the founder leaders (this applies mostly to evangelical congregations). They know their congregations well and what each congregation is today because they built it in that way. None of them has theological degrees above a certificate level. Jehovah's Witnesses are a good exception to the rule, but even they provide training into a system and structure that does not accept change. The same story happens with the assistant pastors even though other professional educational level could be found.

It is becoming a trend for pastors to have their wives also become pastors, even though, they may not share the pulpit. In CEZ the wife of the senior pastor is now taking over because of the declining health of her husband. But among evangelicals, each pastoral family commands the farm. They are in charge of hiring or firing personnel.

Planting a church seems like starting a family business. All family members find a good paid professional job at church. At VA the senior pastor's wife recently was hired within the pastoral staff as psychologist. This issue totally exempts the JW because women do not become elders. That is, women may participate and function at church but never at high leadership levels. Let us remember that Jehovah's Witnesses' leaders do not get paid. All their work is as volunteers.

Among megachurches, pastors are public personalities. The way for any regular member who wants to go up the ladder of leadership is by practicing adulation and sharing gossip with higher level leaders. Neither moral conduct, nor professional experience or degrees can help anyone become a pastoral leader at any of these churches. One needs to show unconditional support, servile attitude, and willing to become a clone trainee of the senior leader. In other words, pastors are not hired by qualifications but by trust. For instance, it was found out that senior pastors are beyond being questioned, and require absolute support. For lower level pastors, their support means that they get to keep their jobs.

Leadership structure at the HC is the most horizontal of all others. Pastor's approval, however, is not necessary to accomplish certain activities, because those in higher positions are the males of the main families who financially support the church and who command and lead worship or church ceremonies or activities (e.g., training sessions, Bible study, and other ceremonies).

The structure of leadership at the JW is pre-established and has no space for creativity because everything comes already prepared from the headquarters of the organization. The leadership structure is volunteer based, more democratic, and much

healthier than the other cases, however. Meanwhile, at the megachurches, the leadership structure is monolithic. The pastor and his family control worship and the whole church structure. Pastor's permission or blessing (approval) is necessary to accomplish activities. In other words, he, or they, run the church, fire and hire people at will.

The Secret of their Growth

The evangelical churches under study may assume that growth happens naturally. *La Visión* system has brought growth to neopentecostal groups, and burned out Christians out of these groups seem to move to mostly nonpentecostal churches like VA. None of these churches, however, is worried about attracting visitors, because a good number of visitors just come and go.

We could categorize the evangelical churches in the following way: Teflon church where no one sticks (HC), anonymous church where anyone can hide (VA, CEZ), and over achiever church that produces burnouts (VA, CEZ).⁸⁰ Again, church leaders play an important role for shaping a culture of hospitality in their local churches. Their understanding of the kingdom of God was limited. That understanding, however, did not seem, practically or theologically, to affect their practices of hospitality (e.g., assimilation/inclusion).

All evangelical groups in this study were considered by the informants as churches for high middle class professional people. So mainly these are the people they seek to attract. Interestingly, those being assimilated and those who dropped out have expressed that what they like of those megachurches is that nobody gets into other's business. That is, megachurches are anonymous churches, a place to hide and to remain *incognito*, and as one pastor once told the researcher something that has happened several

times and that is, “a husband or wife can come with her or his lover, and nobody may find out.” That may be becoming a good port of entry for some evangelicals: anonymity. Megachurches seem to be good places to do church. One can go once and never go back and never be bothered or looked at as an outsider. A different picture is at the House Church, where among 20 people nobody can hide, or among Jehovah’s Witness who may push to pay you a visit in a matter or couple of days because nobody visits their Kingdom Hall without an invitation.

The House church is a church that even the pastor recognizes that people do not stick around. This is like Teflon churches. “Newcomers don’t come with Velcro already applied. It’s up to the congregation to make them stick” (Ratz 1990, 38). For instance, in this study (HC) only one out of five visitors, after attending church for five months remained at church. The relational strength of a church this size does not work.

Jehovah’s Witnesses see their growth as a result of their work. They are the organization of Jehovah! They know this because of their own life testimonies. They have to keep coming back, insist over and over, knowing that someday, even those who today were not very polite to them, may want to hear about Jehovah and His organization. In other words, someone, at any low or bad moment in their lives, will want to hear and be changed. This is the result of many hours, at least in Costa Rica almost 10 hours per week average, of preaching in the streets and home by home of each Jehovah’s Witness volunteer.

For CEZ, *La Visión* has been the secret of their growth. This system is currently the most popular Church Growth program among even some nonpentecostal congregations of any size. Those who apply it, experience growth but have to apply it

above anything! Let us remember that this *La Visión* was introduced by the Guatemalan apostle Carlos Luna, and the system is an exact copy of what years earlier the Colombian pastor Cesar Castellanos presented as *el Modelo of Jesús*. Both famous Latin American pastors have proclaimed receiving this model as a revelation directly from God. Everyone has to admit that the application of this system produces growth, however, it also produces burned out Christian. Neopentecostal⁸¹ churches who have applied this model for eight years are the ones who are producing that *Vida Abundante* may grow. It seems like the growth of the nonpentecostal megachurch *Vida Abundante* is basically from people who have run away, hurt by this system of *La Visión*. This neopentecostal churches are a good example of the over achiever church.

The purpose of *La Visión* is to develop home pastor-leaders. In other words, it is about Church Growth and church multiplication. One weakness of this system is that it only assimilates those who have accepted Christ publicly, like at the altar call, or during a GAL (house discipleship meeting). Those already Christians may be assimilated as well, but they need to know someone who knows the system for the new Christian to be plugged in.

Another weakness in *La Visión* is that depending on the church is a high intensive commitment and labor. Now, there is nothing wrong with high expectations, “effective assimilation churches had high expectations of all of their members” (Rainer, 1999, 23). Those leaders of churches with high expectations using *La Visión*, however, at times push their people to the point of burn out. But even so, one of every three attendees of CEZ is not part of *La Visión* or at least not yet.

Another weakness of *La Visión* is its theological flaws. First, the system itself is designed to present the pastors (volunteer or paid) as spiritual leaders who require total obedience. The person needs to learn to submit to the spiritual authority God has provided. Second, the problem in the person is not sin but demonic oppression. That is the purpose of the retreats called *El Encuentros*. The practice of mental regressions helps pastors in finding out past sins done and received by the retreatants. The retreatant then confesses those sins and exorcism is applied. For instance, at CEZ children's *El Encuentros* were done only twice. The church structure was not able to deal with their own children confessing physical and even sexual abuse done by their parents and church leaders. Another flaw is that *La Visión* calls every single believer to pastoral leadership. The senior pastors have twelve disciples, and those twelve have another twelve, and so on. It is expected that the teachings from the pastors may trickle down all the way through the web of homogenous units. The curriculum depends not on the needs and concerns of the different disciples but on the teachings of the senior pastor.

Another of its flaws, after disarming the person to unconditionally obey the leaders, is to obtain money in exchange for financial miracles. This is how prosperity theology works. It is a good theological marriage in which is that you need people working hard bringing other people, and also you need money to grow. This theology is supposedly based on laws of prosperity found in the Bible.

One more flaw is the idea of inviting people to come to church to hear and accept the gospel. Now, the house groups *GALes* may also become a port of entry but not a very common one. The system is based on the idea that continuing to invite people to church will bring them sooner or later, which is partially true. Not everybody, however, is

willing to come to church, and *La Visión* is not training people to go into the world with the gospel. Finally, for anyone who wants to serve at church has to go through *La Visión*. In other words, everyone has *to be domesticated* in order to serve at that church. The system is simple. If you are not in the system, you are away from God's vision and outside the church.⁸² Is this true of those who are coming unchurched or church shoppers? All evangelical groups in this study were attractional not missional in their evangelistic outreach.

As said above, *Vida Abundante* owes its growth to those abusive neopentecostal churches. In addition, its emphasis on family issues helps to restore what other churches focus on *La Visión* almost destroyed: the family. On the one hand, the objectives and purposes of VA are not very clear. This seems to be a church not based on reality. If they are getting more hurt and apathetic former neopentecostal members, why do they keep talking about itself as a “seeker sensitive church”? They imported a model that is not responding to the reality of the church and the needs of the country. On the other hand, CEZ has a clearer vision and objectives because its system growth (*La Visión*) provides them with a more coherent plan of action.

Those Being Assimilated and The Drop-Outs

Interestingly, after visiting church for six months, not one of the informants was able to recall the mission statement of church. Some informants were capable of only remembering certain slogans or sermons topics but no memorable messages of any kind.⁸³ Six months may not be enough time for visitors to capture those memorable messages, or maybe they have been visiting other churches at the same time.

Among those being assimilated at VA, are a man and a woman already evangelical who left the previous neopentecostal churches because they were hurt. Both came to VA by their own initiative, because someone once mentioned such church to them, and one given Sunday they decided to pay a visit. Jeannette and Reynaldo seemed happy to be at that church, and they see themselves five years from now serving at that church. They participated in the short life of the small groups and were able to develop new friends. They evaluated themselves with an 8 (from 1-10) on how they feel as members of the church. For both of them, their relationship with God has improved, but they are the same people as they have been Christians for many years. Both visitors, come from a neopentecostal background, said they have found peace and tranquility at VA. Are these kinds of visitors a good example of the people that VA tends to attract?

Those interviewed in-depth from CEZ were two women coming from a Roman Catholic background, and were invited to church by members of their family. Not one of them has been assimilated because neither has accepted Christ publicly, as *La Visión* requires. They both, however, recognized that their lives have changed, that they have grown spiritually, and are considered new creatures in Christ. They evaluate themselves (from 1-10) with a 7 as members of this congregation because they did not belong to any small group, and the sermons are the only way to be fed spiritually. They both had a struggle with the “manifestations of the Spirit.” Because of their nominal Roman Catholic background, they had never heard of it. A good thing is that they both have examples for mature Christians to follow. In the matter of sharing their faith, however, they both have not been trained and motivated to do it. Are these the type of visitors CEZ tends to receive?

After five new visitors visiting during six months, only one informant remained at the House Church. The only informant left at HC has ten years of being a Christian and has attended five different churches before. She was hurt and abused financially in her previous church. Her son, once a Christian, is now leaving the church, and she has been overcoming a painful divorce. The only thing she cares about is spiritual warfare and freedom from spiritual bondage. She knows this church can help her, as it is not abusive, and the pastors are approachable. However, that does not do it.

The Jehovah's Witnesses congregation is considered the most dynamic in the area, among its kind. Ninety percent of the people in the congregation are legal or illegal immigrants from Nicaragua, living in a lower income neighborhood known as *La Carpio*. Those in-depth interviewed were immigrants, unchurched by the time they were reached by JW. Then, they considered themselves not yet members because they have not been baptized, although, they had been trained as candidates for baptism. What was holding them back was, in their words, "we are living in sin." They were not married and living with a partner and having children. Interestingly, they were the only people fully being assimilated during the eight months of contact the researcher had with this congregation.

Among the four informants from this case study, one stopped participating by month one of the three of the interviews. Another woman, who after five months attending the Kingdom Hall and receiving at home Bible studies every week, was not very sure of that faith. That left us with the only two people who were reached out and being assimilated by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Considering the effort of many hours per week of "preaching" efforts, the Jehovah's Witnesses are effective reaching out

unchurched but not efficient. Because in eight months they only had two being assimilated, and another two partially being assimilated.

When the researcher contacted this congregation, Danilo and Ana may have been attending already for four weeks. Again, let us remember that before they were invited to attend the Kingdom Hall, they should have gone through a process of Bible study. Jehovah's Witnesses do not invite people "to church", and they do not like to waste their time on those they are not sure would respond to their faith. That is why Ana expressed that when she spent some time without attending the Kingdom Hall and Bible studies, her Jehovah's Witnesses friends did not even greet her in the streets.

The message of the JW is not about feelings but about understanding by reasoning how someone can become a JW. For instance, their message is not for children in the streets and prostitutes because they do not get it, and thus, cannot be changed. Their faith is about good right moral behavior and knowledge of Jehovah in His organization.

People seem to come to VA because of its anonymous, relaxed, and casual environment. Its pop psychology sermons provide healing, and the church is about low expectations. Those who come to CEZ get impressed by its music, the charisma of its pastors, and the offer of miracles and prosperity. *La Visión* system provides a good way for the church to find growth and show off how many people every week join for worship. Jehovah's Witnesses provide to the unchurched a message of being the right place to run from the hostile world. It shows itself as a safe haven, and anyone who wants to join them must be a part and trust the organization of Jehovah. Finally, the House Church may think of itself as friendly and caring, among themselves but not to visitors. Three families control the church, its image, and organizational climate.

Among those who left their megachurches, left because they were burned out, abused, or discovered moral inconsistencies, which they were not able to tolerate. But not one of them left receiving any kind of care. It seems like VA kicked them out because they were not capable of handling the load. CEZ kicked them out for leaving *La Visión*. This works like being excommunicated, with no friends and without any spiritual protection. Another interesting issue is that those who left are somehow (may be unconsciously) seeking for a church like the one they used to call home, and for the majority of them, these were not the first churches they left behind.

Those who drop out of the house church left because the church was not appetizing to them, that is, the style of music, preaching, and other elements were not attractive. But one of those who left also was leaving the faith and did not receive any care. The story repeats itself again: nobody was visiting nor receiving any care.

Conclusion

The analytical grid for this chapter (see figure 11) presented the categories that specified the units of analysis of the participant observation done by the researcher. Thus, let us begin by drawing some general conclusions. First, the setting (i.e., building, facilities, places of worship) were a not friendly for visitors. The researcher found that none of the case study congregations had signs to direct visitors to different areas of the church property, and if they had parking there were no designated spaces for guests. The megachurches were the most difficult to navigate into their buildings, and when in construction (which is almost all the time) getting lost was not difficult, as happened once to the researcher. Their location made driving and finding parking a difficult task to

accomplish. This is a sign that these churches struggle to maintain comfortable and easily accessible space while also creating more room for growth.

Overall, the sanctuaries were uncomfortable because there were no chairs designated for guests, and sometimes the arrangement of the seats allowed more people in while sacrificing their comfort. The meetings were designed for those who were familiar with the —culture of worship|| in evangelical churches. For instance, a non-Christian visitor would not be able to understand many activities going on during worship, such as the case of the neopentecostal megachurches with their way of collecting offerings and the spiritual manifestations during worship. Most would likely perceive this cultural barrier as being difficult to bridge.

Second, the interaction at church for newcomers was not the ideal for assimilation. The megachurch environment illustrates the anonymous church; it is like attending a stadium event or going to a mall, where anyone can hide. The environment at the HC illustrates the Teflon church, where no one sticks. A newcomer has to be accepted by the church's matron in order to be assimilated. For this to happen the socioeconomic level of the newcomer has to be comparable to those families who are already members. The space at HC was suffocating because of the small meeting place and over attention to details with those who visit. The environment at the JW was stiff and stressful because they are not used to receiving walk-ins, and newcomers may feel as if the members are staring at them, wondering the reason for their visit. Overall, none of these churches were very visitor friendly.

Third, the beliefs of each congregation shaped their identity and self-image, as well as the secret of their growth. VA promoted pop psychology, CEZ focused on

financial prosperity, HC sought a practical faith, and JW promised a rescue from this world in chaos. The reason for the growth of the megachurches may lie in those messages. However, in the long term, are those messages enough for a visitor facing a life crisis event? VA provided mass therapy and an overall message of a soothing content with low expectations. CEZ had expectations (La Visión) of growth and preparing servants, but not everyone seemed to respond to it. The attendees often appeared to want to receive their miracles without much work and commitment. Meanwhile, the smaller churches were not able to grow as fast, in part because JW had high expectations and a difficult cultural barrier to cross and HC seemed to lack a desire to grow. When newcomers come to church because they are facing a life crisis, and do not receive pastoral care, this may be an indication that pastoral care in the church is minimal. People may like the sermons at a church, but nothing replaces the caring and unconditional presence of the body of Christ when facing life crises.

Fourth, having a very large congregation may adversely affect the culture of hospitality and the style of assimilation in a church. The megachurches were financially powerful, in contrast with the smaller congregations. The pressure, however, was harder on the megachurches to support their properties and high salaries. One way to cover those expenses was to use their buildings for businesses, such as elementary and secondary bilingual schools. They also rent their setting for concerts or sporting events. To maintain these expenses, these churches must motivate their people to give financially, and even sometimes promise financial miracles like in the case of CEZ. In order to achieve those financial goals these churches need good marketing. As such, it is not uncommon that a megachurch pastor may own TV and radio programs or the stations themselves. Large

congregations are expensive to maintain, and, therefore, megachurches tend to focus inwardly rather than on hospitality and outreach.

Overall, these evangelical churches were not assimilating/including newcomers. JW and CEZ were the only cases in this dissertation that had a system for assimilation, but this was only for new converts, not for all visitors. CEZ and VA received more visitors at their churches than JW. However, JW was more effective in assimilating and providing follow up (care) to the very few they received, but only if they were new converts. None of the churches in this study effectively assimilated/included newcomer

CHAPTER 8: LONGITUDINAL SURVEY-INTERVIEWS

While the previous chapter summarized the perspective of the religious groups on assimilation, this chapter will present the perspective of the newcomers. This is a discussion of the longitudinal phone surveys (see Appendix). Table 2 shows us the informants by name and their respective churches. Those names with an asterisk were those selected for an exit interview. The underlined names indicate those informants who abandoned the church at or before month six.

Table 2. Informants and their respective Religious Groups

VA	CEZ	HC	JW
*Reynaldo	Ana	<u>Stefan</u>	*Danilo
Jose	William	<u>Alejandra</u>	Marta
Carol	*Rebeca	<u>Gabriela</u>	Francis
Johnny	*Silvia	<u>Odin</u>	*Ana
*Janet	<u>Ivan</u>	*Maria	

Each one of the nineteen informants was followed through a period of up to five months from the first time as a visitor. The first interview came after their first visit (week 1), the second interview at week two, the third interview at month 1 (week 4), and then once a month through month 5. Week two through month 5 have the same variables. In the following answers, the church groups have been coded in the following way: CEZ Centro Evangelistico de Zapote, as a neopentecostal congregation; Vida Abundante, VA, is for Evangelical Non-Pentecostal; JW is for Jehovah's Witnesses; and HC is for the House Church.

The first section refers to week one, and the second section deals with comparing week two with the rest of the five months of data. For analysis purposes, each section will be divided in subsections or general variables according to the subtitles of the survey, as

follows. Week 1 will have the general variables on the first contact, first impression, and lifestyle changes. The second section is also divided in subsections according to those in the survey, which are as follows: regular attendance, invitation and participation to special activities, identification with the new church, worship experience, care and contact, personal growth, and other aspects.

Week One

Each informant was interviewed for the first time by phone after no more than six days of his or her first visit to the church (week one). The results of those first interviews are as follows.

First Contact

The reasons the informants first came were because of an invitation of a friend, family member, or on their own initiative, as table 3 shows.

Table 3. How did you come to church?

	Invited by friend	Invited by family	On own initiative	Other reason	Total
HC	4	1	0	0	5
CEZ	1	3	0	0	4
VA	1	1	4	0	6
JW	0	0	0	4	4
Total	6	5	4	4	19

Looking at these statistics brings to mind what Win Arn and Lyle Schaller state that about 75-80% of people at church today first came because a friend or family member invited them. Our numbers are close, maybe because of our small numbers and because they did not include JW in their study. Excluding JW, 58% of the first time

attenders came because they were invited by friends or family. That is, eleven of them (58%) came for the first time to worship because someone (not something) invited them, like a family member or a close friend. Twenty-one percent of the informants, however, came by their own initiative or by word-of-mouth but did not receive a formal invitation from a friend, a co-worker, or a neighbor, nor did they come with anyone to the church. Meanwhile, those who visited the Jehovah's Witnesses were contacted several times at home, and then after several home visits and Bible studies were invited to visit the Kingdom Hall. They are the reason all of the Jehovah's Witnesses informants appeared as "other" as an option.

The evangelistic methods of the different religious groups vary, but the most common one is "inviting people to church." Explicitly, during the interview, the senior pastor of VA assumed that "friends and family members invite others to church," while CEZ trains their people with an adaptation of a method named "Evangelism Explosion"⁸⁴ based on confronting people with the truth of the gospel, engaging them in a religious discussion to show they are wrong and that Christians are right. The JW method has been already explained, going into the streets home by home. Finally, the HC has no method. The method of inviting people to church is not very missional, but at least has in its background the strategy of using natural networks of relationships. By missional, the researcher means using both those natural networks of relationships in the world with non-Christian people and also developing relationships in a neutral environment away from the sanctuary, where Christians meet non-Christians on the grounds of the latter. This missional focus, however, will be discussed in the next chapter.

The question must be asked, then, did the visitors who came by their own initiative come to church for the first time, or did they come from another church? The answer for this question may be found by crossing three variables in the following table that shows us the origin of the evangelical informants who later were invited to the churches under study and by whom they were invited. The codes EP means evangelical Pentecostal (neopentecostal like CEZ), ENP means evangelical non-Pentecostal (like VA), and RC means Roman Catholic. At this time, the Jehovah's Witnesses visitors are excluded because of their unchurched background.

Table 4. Church of origin and church visiting

<i>Church of Destination of the Visitor-Informants</i>					
Church of origin of the informants		Invited by friend	Invited by family	On own initiative	Total
	CEZ	<i>ENP</i> <i>EP</i>	<i>HC</i>	<i>ENP</i> <i>ENP</i> <i>ENP</i> <i>ENP</i>	7
	VA	<i>HC</i> <i>HC</i> <i>HC</i>	<i>EP</i>		4
	RC	<i>HC</i>	<i>EP</i> <i>EP</i> <i>ENP</i>		4
	Total	6	5	4	15

Table 4 summarizes the church of origin in the last 12 months of each informant, in relation to the church each informant was visiting. Let us interpret this table that contains much information: First, four out of five informants from previous evangelical Pentecostal churches came to visit by their own initiative an evangelical non-Pentecostal church *Vida Abundante*. Five of our informants came to VA from an evangelical

Pentecostal Church, and one visitor came from a nominal Roman Catholic background invited by a family member.

Second, of our informants visiting the HC, one came from an evangelical Pentecostal church and was invited by a family member, three came from an evangelical non-Pentecostal church and were invited by friends, and one from a nominal Roman Catholic background was also invited by a friend.

Third, the evangelical Pentecostal church (CEZ) received, among other visitors, two of our informants from a Roman Catholic background, invited by family members, one from another non-Pentecostal church also invited by family members, and another informant from an evangelical Pentecostal church invited by a friend. Finally, interpreting this data, we could conclude that all of the informants who came to these three different evangelical churches are "recycled," that is, they came from other Christian churches.

In other words, 73% of the informants have visited at least another church in the last 12 months. They came from an evangelical church and are now being assimilated in another evangelical church (transfer growth). This raises a serious question. Are evangelicals in Costa Rica attracting, assimilating and holding onto only those that other evangelicals could not assimilate? Are Jehovah's Witnesses the only ones who are really the most missional in that they are reaching those unchurched Costa Ricans? The answers to both questions will be discussed later.

Before visiting church, the informants heard about or noticed for the first time their church of choice through a number of media. Table 5 demonstrates the prevalence of this response.

Table 5. How did you hear or notice for the first time your church of choice?

	Overheard Comments	Mass Media	Church's sign	Group's presence	other	Total
HC	4	0	0	0	1	
CEZ	3	0	0	0	0	3
VA	1	1	2	1	0	5
JW	0	0	0	4	0	4
Total	8	1	2	5	1	16

This reinforces the answers from the previous question because eight informants said they heard comments about church from those friends and family members who invited them. Social networks are at work but primarily among those who are already believers. This happens in three out of four of the evangelical Pentecostal church. This piece of data drives the question about evangelism and church growth deeper because it appears that church members do not break out of their networks to reach new people.

Four out of the five who mentioned that they came to church because of the group's presence in the community were in the JW group. Assimilation at the JW may be more effective because relationships are developed in the streets before the person ever visited the Kingdom Hall. That emphasizes the importance of a religious group's presence in the streets.

Even though media is important in a process of assimilation, by itself it does not bring people to church. There is little evidence that anyone changed churches because of a radio, TV, or newspaper advertisement, or even by just passing by and seeing the sign.⁸⁵ In addition, three of the interviewers did not know what to answer and that is why only 16 answers appear in this chart. The evangelical Pentecostal and the House Church seemed to be more effective inviting people by word of mouth. Meanwhile the evangelical non-Pentecostal church *Vida Abundante* showed a wide spectrum of answers.

The informants were also asked if during the last 12 months they had visited another church. Table 6 shows how they responded.

Table 6. Have you visited any other church in the last 12 months?

	Yes	No	Total
VA	6	0	6
HC	5	0	5
CEZ	4	0	4
JW	0	4	4
Total	15	4	19

Seventy-nine percent of the informants had been to at least one church before visiting the ones under research. Here we have an interesting dynamic of “churched” people looking for another church. In this study, they seem to be uncommitted church nomads that behave like church shoppers.⁸⁶ These people may have attended a church of preference semi-consistently in the past, but they are not committed to full participation in any one church. Therefore, they are not “unchurched”⁸⁷ in the sense normally considered with visitors because they have experience in attending church and even sometimes have been members of one or more churches. Yet, they are now visiting multiple churches at the same time, thus making their attendance at any one church occasional. In this sense they are “shoppers.” Finding a concept to describe this behavior is a challenge. In this study, to describe this phenomenologically they will be called *churched shoppers* to show that they are “churched” people, but they are shopping around at different churches.

On the one hand, we can see that all of the Jehovah's Witnesses informants were unchurched until this religious group reached them. Linking this question with the previous one, we can notice that the presence in the streets of the Jehovah's Witness is

reaching out to unchurched people. On the other hand, the evangelical groups seemed to reach out to *churched shoppers*.

These answers may have to do with what these groups practice and understand by evangelism. The Jehovah's Witness appeared to be more missional going into the world, home by home seeking those who otherwise have never come to church. The evangelical groups tend to be more *attractional*, inviting people to church or expecting them to come. Let us remember, as well, that the Jehovah's Witnesses do not invite people to church at all. They provide friendly contact, and then according to how much interest is shown during their visits and home Bible studies, determines if an invitation to their congregation may follow. This is the reason the researcher was surprised to find those visitors with already some knowledge of the Jehovah's Witnesses doctrines and beliefs.

These informants came to our religious groups seeking something, and table 7 illustrates the different reasons they came to the church.

Table 7. What is your idea for coming to this church?

	Improve spiritual life	Becoming a member	To see if liking it	To resolve a personal situation	Other	Total
CEZ	1	2	1	0	0	4
VA	4	2	0	0	0	6
JW	4	0	0	0	0	4
HC	2	0	1	1	1	5
Total	11	4	2	1	1	19

According to Bast, visitors generally are looking for a friendly and warm church, for a good quality of worship, for a place for the whole family, for a good church building, and for a good church's image (1988, 61-79). "The needs vary widely, and include such concerns as: the desire for a new beginning for one's life; the need for

fellowship with God; a concern to find a place to belong . . . the hope of finding help with a problem” (Bast 1988, 90).

In our case, the most common answer was "I want to improve my spiritual life." People join churches with hopes that their lives will be changed, that they can and will feel as closer connection with God, which God’s meaning and purpose can be brought to bear on their own lives (Braden 1987, 8). We may be talking about people who are looking beyond general issues. Fifty-eight percent of the informants (11) were looking to improve their spiritual life, and that is the reason they came to church. Those more decided were looking for membership (four cases), and two people were looking to see if they would like the church. Jehovah's Witnesses also should warrant our attention because all of their informants said that they wanted to improve their spiritual life. They were not church shopping; they were unchurched and were looking for a way of changing their life. The evangelical non-Pentecostal (VA) informants expressed that same desire, but three of them came from an evangelical Pentecostal background and one Roman Catholic and, thus, seem to be church shopping.

Other Aspects: Life Transitions That Brought Them to Church

This section illustrates another contribution of the Church Growth Movement for evangelization, a psychological adaptation of the principle of receptivity. Charles Arn adopted the Receptivity-Rating Scale from Homes-Rahe Stress Test, from the University of Washington Medical School. The idea is that people are most responsive to a change in life-style (i.e. becoming Christians and responsible church members) during *periods of transition*. A period of transition is a span of time in which an individual’s or family’s

normal everyday behavior patterns are disrupted by some irregular event that requires an unfamiliar response.

Most of the informants were looking to improve their spiritual life perhaps because of certain personal life transitions (periods of transition) they have confronted in the last two years. Table 8 shows the answers to a multiple choice question asking them about personal life transitions and crises they had recently experienced.

Table 8. Personal life-transitions (crises)

	CEZ	VA	JW	HC	Total
significant change religious beliefs	3	3	2	0	8
Lost or changed jobs	3	1	2	2	8
changed homes	0	3	1	2	6
got divorced	0	3	0	1	4
dear one died	1	0	2	0	3
sentimental issues	0	0	1	2	3
got married	1	0	0	2	3
had a child	1	1	0	0	2
lost a child	0	1	0	0	1
had an accident	0	1	0	0	1
Other	0	4	2	0	6
Total	9	17	10	9	45

A period of transition is a span of time in which a person's or family's normal everyday behavior patterns are disrupted by some event that puts them into an unfamiliar situation. The more recent the event in the person's life, the more receptive he or she will be to a new lifestyle that includes Christ and the church. (Arn and Arn 1998, 87)

“We can find that people are going to be most receptive to an invitation to attend a church when: (1) they are going through some sort of transition (moving, marriage, or personal crisis), and (2) they are invited during that time by someone they know and trust” (Oswald 1993, 66). The most common life changing experiences were "significant change in religious beliefs," "lost or changed jobs," and "changed homes," which comprised half of the total choices. Considering that our informants facing these social

readjustments came to or were invited to the church, makes sense. Would the evangelical churches pay attention to the reality of receptive people coming as visitors? Most of them, however, were already evangelicals, meaning that they might be nominal Christians who have had a bad experience in their previous church, or a change in their lifestyle motivated them to come back to or change churches.

Identification and Evaluation of Their First Church Visit

Finally, ending the first week, the informants were asked to evaluate their visit to church. Ninety-five percent of all the informants felt welcomed and accepted at church, and said that they will come back and visit again. Seventy percent said they liked their worship experience very much and 30% said they liked it some. That is, they enjoyed their first visit to church so much that they are willing to come back next week. The researcher wonders if these answers show some cultural patterns of being *polite* and not saying that they did not like the church. Nevertheless, they said they would come back, which is what really matters in this study.

Moreover, the response to the question "What did you like the most about participating in this group?" was a surprise. It was an overwhelming 72% of the informants who said "the message" is what they enjoyed the most during worship. Table 9 shows the prevalence of the different responses to this question.

Table 9. What did you like the most about participating in this group?

	message	environment	leaders	other	Total
CEZ	4	0	0	0	4
VA	4	0	0	1	5
JW	4	0	0	0	4
HC	1	3	1	0	5
Total	13	3	1	1	18

Looking at this data, it generates the following questions: How relevant are the sermons in the spiritual formation of people, or to satisfy their need to confront their religious beliefs, and their family struggles? It could be said that preaching is an effective method for assimilation in an oral society. Nevertheless, is this method sufficient or does each church have to offer more to satisfy the needs of these visitors?

The sermons at *Vida Abundante* had to do with popular psychology regarding self-help, emotional and family healing. The *Jehovah's Witnesses*' emphasized God's kingdom as the only option out of this world of chaos. The *House Church* had to do with becoming a follower of Christ. The *Centro Evangelistico de Zapote* had to do with miraculous prosperity. These sermons, around these competing narratives, may be "the glue" or organizing principle of what holds a congregation together working as a theological stance, according to Lyle Schaller. Is this glue by itself strong enough to hold visitors for a while? That glue as an organizing principle can also be the nationality or ethnic-language factor of the congregation; the denominational identity; the personality and magnetism of the minister; a specific, attainable, measurable, highly visible, and unifying task; or kinfolk ties⁸⁸ (Schaller 1988, 24-36).

This glue represents the culture of the group that the sermon reflects or promotes. Rituals provide space and time for newcomers to perform, to learn how the *other* acts and

how the community of faith becomes that “significant other.” Sermons are part of the rituals, but more interaction needs to take place for the newcomer to learn the new culture. Somehow, however, sermons provide a language use that creates “typified schemes” and helps to relate the newcomer’s biographical experiences with the story of the religious group.

Week Two Through Month Five

From week two through month five the questions were basically the same because of the nature of the longitudinal study. Therefore, the answers will be classified in a comparative way. The objective is to find out what variables are helping people to keep coming back to church and stay there. Let us consider that what brings people to church the first time is not what brings them back a second time.⁸⁹

Attendance

The informants, from week 2 through month 5, were asked if they visited any other religious group, at least once, since the last visit. Table 10 illustrates their positive answers.

Table 10. Have you visited any other religious group?

	CEZ	VA	JW	HC	Total
Month 5	0	1	0	4	5
Month 4	0	1	0	2	3
Month 3	0	0	0	2	2
Month 2	2	1	0	2	5
Month 1	2	0	0	2	4
Week 2	2	0	0	1	3
Total	6	3	0	13	22

The data shows interesting results for analysis. First, Jehovah's Witnesses, as said already, are not usually seekers shopping around for a church. Not one of them was visiting another church when they were reached by Jehovah's Witnesses. The other three churches had at least one person coming from a Roman Catholic background, but none of those four Roman Catholics visitors went to visit another church. That left us with eleven wanderers or nomads minus one faithful church shopper.

CEZ had the same two informants from week 2 through month 1 and month 2, visiting another church, and then they quit visiting. The House Church had only one out of four informants visiting another church on week two until everything drastically changed by month 5. This church was capable of keeping only one of the five initial visitors; this may be because it has no program of assimilation or hospitality. Meanwhile, VA had two informants alternating visiting another church once in months 2, 4, 5. Let us remember that VA has no systematic program to assimilate either visitors, or new converts. This may be the reason that they lose even people who have been attending for several months, who like to visit that church and are already evangelicals.

This data may highlight some dynamics on assimilation. Through time, one may expect people staying more as they may feel that they have found their home church, like in the case of the evangelical Pentecostal church. But the nature of church shoppers, even more those coming from an evangelical background, seems like they know how to move around from church to church, when feeling not committed to one specific church.

Costa Rican churches are showing that not only the front door is open, but also the back door is wide open. Joel Heck states that the major problem with assimilation is the "backdoor" loss. According to the author, the best place to prevent backdoor losses is

at the front door. In this research, only the Jehovah's Witnesses showed some care and follow up to their people. The evangelical churches did not provide any follow-up care to visitors.

That is why Heck suggests that assimilation does not happen automatically and the people at church need to understand and commit to this task. Also, the structure at church should develop enough small groups (a ratio of 7 face-to-face groups for every 100 members) for newcomers to encounter friends, adding more pastoral staff and ministry opportunities for lay people to serve, emphasizing the importance of worship attendance, and the development of activities for spiritual growth (1988, 55). All these great suggestions apply as good points for consideration for the evangelical churches in Costa Rica.

Invited to Special Activities and Participating in Them

In order to be assimilated, the person needs to participate, and the church needs to invite. That is, the church needs to create activities and invite so that the new person may incorporate the values, rituals, and beliefs, and interact with possible new friends. Now, let us remember that the invitations from the churches to the visitors were not always as personal as could be expected. They probably were general invitations in the church bulletins or from the pulpit. Therefore, here we are handling answers about those who were invited or felt invited. They were invited, but did they participate? The informants were asked if they were invited to participate in any special activity, besides the weekend regular worship services and if they participated in the activities to which they were invited. Table 11 shows the first answer on the left column and the second answer on the

right column to compare the level of participation. Let us keep in mind that there were "missing" and "no" answers (N=19).

Table 11. General comparison of answers from week 2 through month 5 about interviewees feeling invited and their response to those invitations.

	Interviewees that felt invited to a special event	Interviewees that responded to the invitation
Month 5	9	4 (44%)
Month 4	13	10 (76%)
Month 3	9	3 (33%)
Month 2	14	5 (35%)
Month 1	11	9 (81%)
Week 2	10	7 (70%)

Comparing these two answers, the average total response of the interviewees to the invitation of their churches was 56.5%. That is, a little over half of the visitors through a period of five months visiting the same church responded to the invitations. Adding more data to this, the positive total response of the informants per church is as follows: VA 38%, HC 31%, CEZ 30%, and JW 30%. This is interesting because that new data shows us that even though the CEZ was the church that the interviewees expressed as most inviting, it was the church with the lowest percentage of response.

There is a limitation with the CEZ church, however. Their method of assimilation and Church Growth (*La Visión*) is only oriented to new converts, not to newcomers who are already Christians. On the other hand, the church with more positive responses was the evangelical non-Pentecostal. Nevertheless, this did not last long. Sixty-six percent of the informants said they were involved in small group activities, when those groups were alive for a while. We also need to remember that CEZ and VA are megachurches. While the Jehovah's Witnesses is a church under 100 attendees, and the house church is a smaller church (25 attendees).

The size of the church seems to affect the type of invitations made and the number of activities available to the visitor. That is to say, that one may expect more activities in the megachurches but fewer personal invitations; while in smaller churches one may expect fewer activities, but invitations that are more personal. Therefore, although smaller churches may have fewer activities, the response to these activities may be higher due to the type of invitations being more personal.

Now, one may think that for visitors with little or limited orientation, it may be difficult to feel free to ask and move around to respond to invitations, even though, the majority were already churching people and were invited by friends and family members. The limited response may have to do with the nature of churching shoppers, who can move around from church to church as they please, and may have little commitment to one church. It may be that five months, for churching shoppers, is not enough time to commit to a church. Is this an early sign of nominalism? Are these churching shoppers burned out, apathetic, and bored of doing church?⁹⁰

Even though the churches under study in this dissertation were not registering a decline, and not even noticing a decline at a national level, their leaders have noticed a growing dissatisfaction among evangelicals. This dissatisfaction is notorious among evangelicals with no local church who travel from church to church as recurrent visitors, and are looking for an alternative home church. These folks were irregular in their attendance and behave like religious *nomads*, unable or unwilling to find a home church. Is this condition something to be worried about among evangelicals in Costa Rica? Are we talking about burned-out, nominal evangelicals?

Eddie Gibbs mentions that nominality is a fluctuating and selective condition (1994, 14). This fluctuation and confusing condition between the church and the world creates a “nominality zone.” In this zone, people are “at the point of abandoning the church or being rejected by it. There are those who have become disoriented and are wandering around not knowing what to believe or where to go for help” (1994, 14). Also there are those who are disillusioned and want to abandon the church, and also those willing to remain at a threshold of not belonging but still wanting to believe, or somehow belonging and not sure what to believe (1994, 14-15).⁹¹ So, is the evangelical church in Costa Rica on the edge of witnessing the serious problem of nominalism?⁹²

There has been an elusive problem in the country, however. The church keeps growing but not as fast as the growth of the population, so the percentage of evangelicals and Pentecostals in the population is declining. Therefore, the problem of nominalism has not been taken seriously because the chairs or pews are filled every Sunday, and every year more chairs and pews have to be added. However, that “growth” does not diminish the problem of nominalism.

In Costa Rica, believers can find a wide religious market of churches from which to be a part. Megachurches, because of their lack of pastoral care and fussy moral standards, allow believers to be selective in their beliefs and moral conduct. People are taught to seek a religious product that may provide them with prosperity, guidance, or easy steps to live a fruitful and happy life on earth primarily and in the eternal life (self-help).

Gibbs argues that one of the causes of nominalism is the topic of this dissertation: “no effective procedures for incorporating newcomers” (1994). In smaller churches like

the Jehovah's Witness congregation and the House Church, assimilation is more an attitude than organizational issues. While among megachurches, it is an issue of organization rather than attitude. "The larger the congregation, the more intentional and sophisticated must be the incorporation procedures" (Gibbs 1994, 86). When churches end up with attendees not involved beyond worship on Sunday, they become fertile soil for nominality. This is the problem of the evangelical churches under study in this dissertation: There is no system of assimilation for visitors.

Another question is closely related to the previous two, having to do with options that these churches created to invite their people. The choices for answers were "individual meetings (2-3 people)" like counseling meetings, "small group meetings (4-10 people)", "medium size groups (11-40)" like small retreats, and "large to massive meetings (41 and more)" like retreats, or concerts. The majority of answers centered around invitations to participate in small and medium size groups during the first three months. For months four and five, the highest frequency of answers was around large to massive meetings. Generally speaking, the interviewees' frequency of answers were 40 for small to medium size groups, and 26 for groups over 41 people or more people; with 22 answers that "do not apply" to the question because the interviewees were not, or did not feel invited. That is, the majority of the invitations were to participate in small group activities.

A few issues may have affected these answers. First, during seven weeks the evangelical non-Pentecostal church created small groups that had a good response. During the first month, four out of the six of the informants participated in these groups, which sadly were shut down by the church because nobody provided follow up. Second,

another issue during month 4 and 5 was the participation of the Jehovah's Witness in their yearly massive communion service (during Holy Week), and then next month their massive meeting. Jehovah's Witnesses also have small group-home Bible studies where every member is expected to attend once a week. These may be the main reasons why after month three there is an increment in answers around large meetings in these two groups.

Now, considering that at least one person in each church came from a Roman Catholic background, and the rest were somehow "churched" people (excluding the unchurched informants from the Jehovah's Witnesses), the series of questions about having invited people to come to church with them, reveals certain insights. It is interesting that, when questioned whether or not they felt welcome and accepted at church, each one of the persons interviewed unanimously responded that they felt welcomed and accepted during their visits to church from week 2 to month 5.⁹³ If that is so, did they invite people to come to church, if that church is so welcoming and nice?

Evangelical churches under study may want to have a clear identity on paper but were not able to transfer that statement on paper to their congregations.⁹⁴ That is difficult to do if small groups do not exist or are not available to every newcomer, or if church activity is reduced only to weekend worship. In addition, it is difficult if each church lives under pressure from lack of pastoral care. That affects in conflicts not being confronted or attended, and therefore, lack of harmony and cooperation. If not all pastors were enthusiastic, as well as were those who were the church people, and the warm and inviting welcome was superficial, then a place to land was very rough. In other words, the evangelical Costa Rican churches under study were not inviting churches.

Table 12 illustrates the progressive number of newcomers who invited others to come with them to church.

Table 12. Have you invited people to come to church with you?

	VA		CEZ		JW		HC	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Month 5	4	1	3	0	3	0	1	0
Month 4	5	0	4	0	2	1	1	2
Month 3	6	0	3	1	3	1	0	0
Month 2	6	0	3	1	2	1	3	2
Month 1	4	0	2	2	2	0	3	2
Week 1	4	1	1	2	1	1	2	3
Total	29	2	16	6	13	4	10	9
Total %	32%	2%	18%	7%	14%	4%	11%	10%

Throughout the months when the visitors attended church, 75% of them invited others, at least once, to come with them to church, (23% did not). It is expected that because churches that have an assimilation program in place, their people may feel motivated to invite others to church. That is the case of the evangelical neopentecostal megachurch CEZ where 71% invited others. The evangelical non-Pentecostal megachurch VA does not have a program of assimilation and approximately 32% of the informants were motivated to invite others to church. The House church shows little action in their visitors with low percentages of those responding yes or no. The Jehovah's Witnesses, however, do not emphasize inviting people to church in a random fashion, but rather that they invite those who have shown interest in their faith and only after they have participated in some Bible studies. This shows that a church with a strong assimilation program to both newcomers and new converts can make a difference.

According to Schaller, there are also some general ways people are excluded and/or discouraged from joining a local church. For instance, among those ways that apply to the Costa Rican evangelical church are not inviting people, focusing on real

estate when discussing how many people a congregation can accommodate, perpetuating the small church, reducing the opportunities to develop new groups, institutional self centering rather than focusing on outreach, not facilitating relationships between members and newcomers, and focusing on one type of population as a target for evangelism (Schaller 1988, 51-68). With these insights from Schaller, it seems like the culture of the evangelical church in Costa Rica is perpetuating its own way towards nominalism.

The following answers in table 13 have to do with the question of "who did you invite to come to church?" Of those 75% who invited someone the following choices were mentioned:

Table 13. Who did you invite to come to church?

		Church Group				Total
		CEZ	VA	JW	HC	
Week2-Month 5	Family	8	7	4	1	20
	Friends	5	16	8	8	37
	Coworkers	2	1	0	1	4
	multiple answers	3	4	1	2	10
Total		18	28	13	12	71

Throughout five months, the visitors under study who invited someone to come with them to church, decided to invite in the following order: friends (52%), family (28.5%), co-workers (5.7%), and multiple answer (a multiple mixture of all the above options) (14.2%).

This raises an important issue related to the importance of extending an invitation to someone to attend church. Let us remember that 58% of our informants were invited

by friends or family members to come to church. 75% of them decided to invite others, at least once. In other words, one of every four of our visitors never invited someone to come to church, and only slightly over half were invited themselves initially. Going back to Schaller, the most widely used technique to keep people from joining is simply to *not* invite them, and this seems to be happening in Costa Rican evangelical churches.

It was also interesting to see that 86% of the informants discovered that they had close friends and family members in the churches they were visiting, with 52% having family members and 29% identifying friends. Normally, having friends or family in the church contributes to the likelihood of assimilation taking place. It is also important, however, that they develop new friends.

Some other questions had to do with whether or not they were able to develop new friends and how many. Also on an average, throughout five months, 74% of the informants were able to develop new friends. Within the range of 1-7 new friends 42%, within the range of 8-15 new friends 19%, and within the range of 16 and more friends 13%.

[T]he number of close friends a new member develops in the church has a direct influence on whether he or she continues as an active member. If after six months the new member can identify few or no close friends in the church, the chances are high that the person will soon be inactive. (Arn and Arn 1998, 143)

Let us look at this data from a different perspective. Forty-two percent of visitors came to church by their own initiative, an average of 43.5% did not respond to the invitation of their churches to participate in events, and a total average of 14% of our informants were not able to find friends or not able to visit church with their family members. In addition, 26% of them were not able to develop new friends showing that they may not have a chance to be assimilated. Joel Heck claims that the influence of

friends and relatives is crucial in a person's decision to join a church. Here, however, 1 of every 4 of the visitors was not assimilated because was not able to develop friendships during those first six months. "The first six months are crucial. New members not integrated into a church within those first six-months could already be on their way out the back door" (Arn 1987, 23).

Experience at Worship

In this section, the informants were asked what they liked the most during worship and if anything during worship was difficult to understand. The character of the worship service is an important reason for returning to a church. What "newcomers are looking for is easier to sense than to describe. . . . They hope to hear a word from God. . . . looking for clarity and guidance. . . . to be lifted above themselves" (Bast 1988, 67). In our case it seems that the sermons are what seem to provide that "sense" newcomers may be looking for. From week one we can remember that an overwhelming 72% of the informants said that "the message" delivered during worship was what they liked the most. From month 1 through 5, an average total of 67% of the informants said that what they enjoyed the most were the sermons. Now, 20% of them also said they liked all in the worship and other rituals in worship were only a 13%. On the question of what they did not like in worship, 71% of the interviewees said "nothing", and just 29% expressed they did not like other aspects of worship.

The informants were also asked if something during worship was difficult to understand, and 88% responded negatively. Only those from a Roman Catholic background had concerns, mostly those visiting the evangelical Pentecostal church, about the manifestations of the Spirit and the collection of offerings and tithes. That is, 88% of

the informants felt always comfortable at church. It seems like for all of the informants the primary source of spiritual formation, or just spiritual information, is the sermon.

Personal Contact with Leaders (Pastoral Care)

The researcher asked the informants about pastoral care. The survey also asked if those leaders were the main leaders, other leaders, or no leaders, in the case of receiving phone calls or home visitations. Six questions were asked on having personal contact with any of the leaders of church, including phone calls or a home calling from anyone. Table 14 illustrates their responses to these questions. Seventy-four percent of the informants said to have had a personal conversation at least once with one of the leaders of their churches during the five months of visiting. In the same way, 22% received a phone call, and 23% was visited by someone from church during those five months. In other words, the contact from the church to the visitors was minimum, while the visitor had to go back to church to contact church's leaders. Why is personal contact important? "Visitors seem less impressed by welcoming gestures from clergy. When a lay person reaches out to newcomers, they react to that spontaneity and presume it is because of a genuine and voluntary interest" (Weeks 1992, xv).⁹⁵

Table 14. Having personal contact at least once with any of the church leaders (Only evangelical churches, excluding Jehovah's Witnesses)

	W2	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total
CEZ	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
VA	0	2	4	1	2	0	9
HC	4	5	4	0	1	0	5
Total	4	7	8	2	3	0	15

Leadership practices make a difference between the two megachurches. The leaders of VA tend to be more approachable, more casual in the way they dress, and they

hang around worship services relating to and sometimes greeting some people before and after the services. This allows for people to talk to them or to greet them, even though, this church does not have a formal process of assimilation. At CEZ, however, the pastors always dress formally and sit at front at “the pastoral pew.” If anyone dares to greet them, he or she has to go all the way up to the front of the church. They are not easy to talk to and were a challenge for even the researcher to get an interview with them. For instance, in the minds of the secretaries and associate pastors, for the researcher trying to interview the senior pastor or his wife was just a ridiculous idea to pursue. “They are important people and are always busy.” The associate pastors are approachable in the since that one day weekly they are at their office receiving walk-ins requiring counseling, but anyone who wants to see them has to wait in line.

The evangelical churches under study did a poor job in this area of facilitating friendship ties between newcomers and regular attendees. Only the CEZ congregation had a good system for assimilation, but only for those after accepting Christ publicly. Let us remember that only 74% of the informants in this dissertation were able to develop new friends at church during their six months of visiting (42% of them within a range of 1-7 friends). According to Schaller, in the North American context, there are four routes to inclusion where newcomers can be located within the first year of uniting with any congregation.⁹⁶ Those less likely to become inactive are in the following order: 1) those becoming part of a small group before formally joining the congregation; 2) those developing meaningful relationships in a small group after joining the congregation; 3) those accepting a role or office, or 4) those accepting a task or job as a worker in the church to help themselves feel assimilated. Those who do not fit into any of the previous

categories are inactive, or are in the process of inactivity or the process of dropping out of the church.

In summary: What could we expect when none of the evangelical churches knew the number of transfers-out, and only the House Church, and somehow the CEZ had registered new members? Only the CEZ had small groups, but not everyone was integrated. These churches recognized that maybe 20% of their people were committed members. Costa Rican evangelicals have a deep problem of assimilation and pastoral care already engraved in their church culture. These churches are like factories that produce inactive members, where some are heading to become nominal Christians! Developing inactive Christian members is a huge problem for any country.⁹⁷

This issue of non-assimilated people becoming inactive Christians is serious business! Trying to assimilate inactive people is even harder because it is the equivalent of calling people to repentance the second time (see Hebrews 6). This is the root of the problem of nominalism within the evangelical church in Costa Rica. Only the Jehovah's Witnesses had a good system for assimilation, and the CEZ church, for those who accepted Christ publicly, or already knowing Christ, took the initiative to ask and be incorporated into the *GALes*.

In other words, the evangelical congregations under study for lacking a system of assimilation (or a healthy one) become excellent in the formation of inactive members. Considering that almost 60% of the church visitors were church shoppers. Here we have a case of a recycling crowd of church shoppers who may be inactive evangelicals looking for many churches at the same time.

Strategic keys are churches minimizing the “we-they” division, while revising traditional systems of decision-making and governance of the church. Another option is to develop as many fellowship groups as possible to create more options for belonging. “In general, the longer the congregation has been functioning from this same location, the greater the need for this ratio of six or seven small face-to-face groups per one hundred members” (Schaller 1988, 96). Nevertheless, after six months, unanimously, almost all the informants in the exit interview used in their language the “we-they” division. Among evangelical church shoppers, six months were not enough time to be assimilated because their churches did not possess a good system of assimilation.

Schaller ends his book with a wise statement:

It is un-Christian for a congregation to seek new members unless it is also willing and able to accept them into that called-out community.... [a congregation should be] looking first at their ability to assimilate new members before embarking on an excessively simplistic Church Growth campaign that may produce a large proportion of inactive, alienated, and disenchanted people from among new members and cause the long-time members to feel defeated, disillusioned, and rejected. (1988, 128)

Comparing Smaller and Larger Churches

In the case of smaller churches, the personal contact and a good program of assimilation makes a difference. Jehovah’s Witnesses not only provide personal contact, but also a kind of missional strategic way (but not contextual) of *evangelism*, a good assimilation program, and a good discipleship formation. The House Church which is four times smaller than the Jehovah’ Witnesses congregation, provides good personal contact because of its size, but has no evangelistic, assimilation or discipleship program. Table 15 shows these comparisons.

Table 15. Having personal contact at least once with any of the church leaders
Comparing Megachurches with Small Churches

	W2	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total
Megachurches	0	2	4	2	2	0	10
Smaller Churches	5	6	5	2	3	3	24
Total	5	8	9	4	5	3	34

Let us remember that 26% of our informants responded that during five months of visiting church they never had a personal contact with any of the leaders. On the one hand, smaller churches were the ones who provided contact that is more personal, phone calls and home visits to the informants. The church that did the best job in all these categories was the Jehovah's Witnesses. Even though the House Church (as a small church) provided good contact during the first two months, only one of the five informants remained at church by month 5. On the other hand, the megachurches did a poor job contacting the informants.

Phone calls, visiting people at home, or personal contacts between churches' lay leaders and new people are important for assimilation, but appear to be unimportant for the evangelical churches in Costa Rica. Table 16 illustrates these ideas.

Table 16. Did you receive a phone call from any of the leaders from church?

	W2	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total
Megachurches	0	1	0	2	1	1	5
Smaller Churches	4	2	3	3	3	0	15
Total	4	3	3	5	4	1	20

“The pastor should make a call on every third time visitor. (This assumes a previous call has been made by a lay member)” (Bast 1988, 130). Megachurches in this area of providing a phone call did a poor job. Half of the visitors received at least one phone call from one of the leaders from church. In the case of the megachurches, those

who called were not among the paid pastoral staff but volunteer lower rank pastors of small groups. The VA made three calls during the time they used to have small groups and two by the CEZ. Small churches, on the other hand, like visitors of the HC received eight phone calls, and the JW phoned their visitors five times. It is not necessary to make phone calls when home visitation is the strength of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Table 17. Were you visited at home, or by any of the leaders from church?

	W2	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total
Megachurches	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Smaller Churches	2	3	3	4	3	3	18
Total	2	3	3	5	3	3	19

It is true that for smaller churches this kind of care may be easy to execute because the pastor provides pastoral care. Megachurch staff-pastors in Costa Rica, however, are hired to execute programs not to provide care. In the previous table we can notice that only one visitor from CEZ was visited by a volunteer (lay pastor) of a small group. Visiting, however, is the strength of the Jehovah's Witnesses because seventeen out of the eighteen visits were theirs.⁹⁸

We could conclude with this data of personal contact that the Jehovah's Witnesses, as part of the category of "smaller churches", does a better job providing contact and pastoral care to its people. This may be the reason they say, "We do not have drop-outs." That is, personal contacts from leaders, phone calls, and home visitation do not make any difference if it is not part of a whole system of evangelism, assimilation, and discipleship. Evangelical churches, however, neither have a healthy good system for evangelism, assimilation, and discipleship, nor do they provide good care by visiting, phone calling, and leadership contacts.

Personal Spiritual Growth

The informants were asked if they had participated in a special event that has helped them grow in their faith, and if so, what was the activity. They were also asked if they would consider themselves the same or a new person since visiting church, and how they would describe that change.

Table 18. "Have you participated in a special event that helped you to grow spiritually?"

	Yes						No					
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total
VA	1	1	0	3	3	8	3	5	6	2	2	18
CEZ	0	2	0	2	1	5	4	2	4	2	2	14
HC	0	1	0	1	1	3	4	4	0	2	0	10
JW	2	1	3	1	0	7	0	2	1	2	3	8
Total	3	5	3	7	5	23	11	13	11	8	7	50

Participation in events that promote spiritual growth is extremely important for assimilation. The visitor needs to feel that their spiritual needs are being met. Let us remember from a previous question that the total response of the interviewees to the invitation of their churches was 56.5%. That is, little over half of them participated in special events where they were invited or felt invited. In this case, 31.5% of our informants mentioned to have participated in a special or meaningful event for spiritual growth. This result may be because the church did not provide special events all the time, and the informants did not perceive the activities as special, or they did not feel personally invited, or they did not want to participate. The point is that they did not participate. These churches visited by the researcher all created special activities, even if they did not have a good assimilation program.

The informants found new friends, family members and former friends at church. If the large majority were already believers (excepting the Jehovah's Witnesses), why did

they show apathy? During the time the researcher interviewed the Jehovah's Witnesses, it was Holy Week when they celebrate partaking in Holy Communion and in the following months they had their national assembly. Those were meaningful spiritual events. The House Church only had small group studies for couples and women as special events. Megachurches had couples' retreats, one congress on ministry, and the CEZ was always having their activities of Church Growth but only for those who had accepted Christ by coming up front during an altar call, or accepted Christ after being invited to participate of a home small group.

A previous question asked about their motivation for coming to church. Fifty-eight percent of the interviewees said they were coming to church because of wanting to improve their spiritual life. Sixty-eight point five percent of the informants, however, did not participate in a special event throughout five months of visiting church. Specifically, among evangelicals churches 57.5% did not participate in any meaningful spiritual events. How could we explain this apathy among evangelicals? Eighty percent of those who came to evangelical churches came from other churches. Is this apathy characteristic of those evangelicals who move from church to church like the church shoppers? Is it mainly because they are burned out from other churches or because they just like to shop around without committing to any church like nominal Christians? If so, then why are not they looking for more participation, in order to belong?

Table 19. Would you consider yourself a new person since you've been visiting this church?

	Yes						No					
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	Total
CEZ	4	4	4	4	3	19	0	0	0	0	0	0
VA	3	5	5	5	3	21	1	1	1	0	2	5
JW	2	2	4	2	3	13	0	1	0	1	0	2

HC	2	4	0	3	1	10	2	1	0	0	0	3
Total	11	15	13	14	10	63	3	3	1	1	2	10

The informants were asked if they considered themselves new persons since attending church. Table 19 summarizes the answers. Eighty-six percent of the informants (68.5% in evangelical churches) said they considered themselves renewed people since attending church. They did like the sermons, but their participation in small groups or meaningful spiritual events were low, most are “recycled” evangelicals. That is, they considered themselves new persons but did not participate in activities of spiritual growth. How do they feed themselves spiritually if the majority of them only come to church on Sunday? Is doing church what they understand about being a Christian? Is attending worship what they may understand as a spiritual growth activity?

Other Aspects of Their Experience

In this section the informants were asked if they have seen anything that they have not enjoyed in the church they are visiting; if they have had time to read, watch, or listen to programs, read books or other material that reflect the beliefs of the new religious group, and finally how they get informed about the activities of the church they are visiting. Eighty-six percent of the informants responded not finding anything unlikeable at church.

The informants were asked “How did you get informed about the church’s beliefs?” as an open-ended question; that is, the answers were not suggested choices.

Table 20 illustrates their answers.

Table 20. How did you get informed about the church’s beliefs?

	Bulletins	TV	Multiple	Phone	Internet	Total
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	(Printed stuff)		Media	reminders		
Month 1	JW (2) HC (1)	CEZ (2)	VA (3)	VA (1)		9
Month 2	JW (3)	CEZ (2) VA (2)	CEZ (1)	VA (2)		10
Month 3	ENP (1) JW (4)	CEZ (2) ENP (1)	VA (2)	VA (1)		11
Month 4	JW (3)	CEZ (2) VA (1)	VA (2)	VA (1)	VA (1)	10
Month 5	JW (3)	CEZ (2) VA (1)	VA (2)			8
Total	17	15	10	5	1	48

Megachurches were the ones with TV and radio programs, a good outlet to propagate the beliefs of each group. On the other hand, the House church did not propagate their beliefs via mass media (the Jehovah's Witnesses propagate only via printed mass media). Thirty-five percent of the informants said that they were informed by printed media like bulletins, while 31% were informed via mass media. There seems to be no difference between being informed about church activities and being informed about church beliefs. Table 21 illustrates the answers about being informed about church activities.

Table 21. How do you get information about the different activities at church?

	Announcements	Phone call	Bulletins (Printed stuff)	Total
Month 1	VA (4) JW (1) HC (3)	JW (1) HC (1)	CEZ (4)	13
Month 2	VA (6) JW (1) HC (4)	JW (2) HC (1)	CEZ (4)	18
Month 3	CEZ (1) VA (6) JW (3)	JW (1)	CEZ (3)	14
Month 4	VA (5) JW (1) HC (1)	JW (1)	CEZ (4) JW (1)	13

Month 5	VA (5) JW (3)		CEZ (3)	11
Total	44	7	19	70

The informants were invited or felt invited to participate in church activities. Let us remember that their response to church invitations was low. They were informed about church activities mostly by the announcements at church (63%). That is, they were informed to participate in church activities directly from the pulpit. This poses another question, why is their participation in church activities so poor, if they were present at church while they were invited to participate in spiritual activities? The key answer to this issue lies in that

bulletin announcements or verbal announcements from the pulpit are not a sufficient invitation to newcomers. We must speak to people face-to-face to invite them to our fellowship activities, Bible studies, or our service projects. We must also make the effort to bring them, sit with them, introduce them, include them in our conversations—and not just during the first time they attend. (Heck 1988, 29)

This, however, did not happen at any of the evangelical churches.

Conclusion

People often come to a church because of a life-crisis or as a result of a painful conflict in their previous church. CEZ and VA show that big churches are magnetic. Their size and type of worship attracts people, but often people do not stick. When people do not stick they may tend to become inactive by being irregular in their attendance and showing signs of low commitment for participating in church activities. While being inactive they may begin visiting other churches, which may classify them as church shoppers. After awhile, these inactive Christians by not having a home church that provides them care, if facing a personal life crisis, or a painful conflict at church may

become nominal believers. The concern for these churches should be the following: if they have been receiving churchgoers, that is a sign of inactivity that these uncommitted Christians may be becoming nominal believers.

The churches seemed to behave like communities that produce and reproduce inactive Christians. At the time of the study, their leaders had shown no willingness to face this reality by providing a system of assimilation. The auditoriums of these churches are full, their budgets are strong, and they seem to be growing, but they are growing through a recycled crowd of inactive believers.

PART III: MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Part III develops the following theoretical and strategic missiological implications: (1) the balance necessary between Church Growth theory and Kingdom theology; (2) A review of theories for assimilation/inclusion for the Costa Rican context; (3) practical recommendations for Costa Rican churches on the assimilation/inclusion of newcomers, like the “grace margin model,” and a series of strategies for assimilation/inclusion; and (4) areas for further research.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will be divided into four major sections. The first section will include a summary of the key applications found in this study from the theoretical frameworks of Church Growth and Kingdom theology. The second section will provide a summary of the findings in this study as they relate to specific concepts from the theoretical framework on assimilation. Third, a model for helping local churches to be inclusive, based on the grace-margin model, will be suggested. Fourth, recommendations for a system of assimilation will be presented, starting with general recommendations, and ending with specific recommendations, ending with a series of strategies for assimilation. Finally, this chapter will by suggesting areas for further research.

Church Growth and Kingdom Theology

As was stated in chapter one, the Church Growth Movement is strong in sociological observations but weak in theological reflections, and Kingdom theology is strong in theological reflection but weak on strategies to accomplish God's mission. This dissertation maintains that there should be a tension held between the theological (Kingdom hospitality and inclusion) and sociological approaches (assimilation) to understand the church. This is what makes missiology a unique discipline. It is important to maintain this theological and sociological tension because the church is both a human institution (i.e., a sociological reality) and the body of Christ (i.e., a spiritual reality). In order to better research, understand, and provide suggestions to any church, it is necessary to hold these two perspectives in creative tension. The researcher's intention was not to create a new fusion of the two, but, rather, by holding both perspectives in

tension, to recognize the theological limitation of one and the strategic limitation of the other.

Church Growth

McGavran's theology of culture had both strengths and weaknesses. According to McGavran people can come to Christ and maintain their particular cultural identity (1973, 88).⁹⁹ This has been the foundational idea undergirding the key missiological principles of the indigenous church, contextualization, and the homogeneous unit principle.¹⁰⁰ This idea has brought a lot of criticism to the Church Growth movement. McGavran should not, however, be misunderstood. He was not proposing that people becoming Christian within their own culture should justify tribal animosities, segregation, or racism (McGavran 1970, 209-213). McGavran was brilliant to observe that in any nation missionaries should seek for "cultures," not just one "culture." His point was to present the gospel in each different culture and allow that gospel to take shape in the wide variety of the human mosaic.

This idea of coming to Christ and maintaining a particular cultural identity can also be illustrated by using the game of checkers as an analogy. The "checkboard may help us visualize the lines that organize social interaction. Each square on the board represents different types of people. Lines around the boxes define patterns of social interaction. Groups as well as individuals occupy boxes on the board" (Kraybill 2003, 195). This is the way that humans naturally tend to behave, by organizing themselves within social squares.¹⁰¹ McGavran's observations about human behavior in people groups reflect this reality. Connecting the image of "social squares" with McGavran's homogeneous units helps us to recognize the strategic genius of McGavran for

spreading the gospel. “It shows that people become Christian fastest when the least change of race or clan is involved” (McGavran 1955, 23).

Thus, McGavran’s rationale was to plant churches in each human mosaic (people group) around the world. This was a brilliant way to develop evangelistic and church planting strategies in light of common human behavior! This perspective, however, could be misleading if taken only as a pragmatic strategy for Church Growth, without carefully evaluating it from a theological perspective for Kingdom growth. From a kingdom perspective, Jesus played a new game of “social checkers,” a game that Kingdom people are also called to play. Jesus intentionally moved all around the checkboard building bridges between other social boxes and overcoming cultural labels.¹⁰²

Christ is our model on how to approach cultures. When churches seek to affect cultures with the gospel of the Kingdom, a new game of social checkers must be played. Cultural diversity must be recognized, but cultural inclusion and the breaking of cultural barriers is also necessary for the growth of the church. McGavran’s concept of allowing people to maintain their cultural identity and finding ways to express Christianity within their own cultures need not be rejected. However, it must be combined with a kingdom theology of inclusion and welcoming. This may be a slower process, but it is more in tune with the model Jesus gave us. This approach helps to overcome the weaknesses of McGavran’s theology of culture.

McGavran’s biblical theology of mission was also weak. For McGavran, fulfilling the Great Commission is achieved by planting growing indigenous churches in every *panta ta ethne*. “Thus, the central task and the primary mission of the Church is the

communication of the gospel to those who have yet to believe, to incorporate them in congregations and to multiply churches among every people on earth” (Pinola 1995, 101). Along with being biblical reductionism, the weakness lies in McGavran’s ecclesiology. The church, for him, is God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. The only place where God (and salvation) can be found is in the church (McGavran 1969, 378). The objective of mission for McGavran is for churches to grow and multiply in every ethnic group (homogeneous unit). Mission, then, is in terms of evangelization and church planting only.¹⁰³

This approach is also weak because of its reductionistic nature. McGavran bases his explanation of the concept of mission from the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-18) and a few of the Kingdom parables. McGavran emphasized that the disciples were instructed to disciple all nations and saw making disciples as the first and foremost missional calling. His interpretation of discipling, however, was primarily the sharing of the gospel. He used the terminology “perfecting” to refer to the process of forming disciples once they have joined the church, but he saw this as a secondary task. No other mission endeavor, such as social justice work, should replace discipling among receptive people groups. In his theory, these aspects of mission will happen as a result of Church Growth. “The church is the most potent instrument for social advance, and hence multiplying churches is the best way to bring about social changes which God desires” (McGavran 1977, 1).

“McGavran has a strong emphasis on the fact that *Missio Dei* is a divine enterprise based on the will of God and His passion to find the lost” (Pinola 1995, 122). His biblical reductionism, empirical and functional ecclesiology, however, does not show

the deep theological meaning of *Missio Dei*.¹⁰⁴ His harvest theology overshadowed a deeper understanding of *Missio Dei*.

In sum, Church Growth is “a mixture of anthropological observation, sociological analysis, biblical assumptions, and theological language, imposed on the New Testament text” (Van Engen 1994, 288). Even more, Church Growth theology tends to be reduced to an ecclesiocentric enterprise (Van Engen 1994, 34; Miles 1981, 143; Pinola 1995, 94). This is the price McGavran (and others) paid for reading the Scriptures only “through Church Growth eyes.”¹⁰⁵ This “shallow hermeneutic” has been the weakness in the Church Growth movement (Costas 1974, 131).

Yet, Church Growth has produced helpful strategic and sociological tools for researching the church. This study has drawn upon those tools in order to understand the situation in the case studies presented. The churches in this study were not guided by Church Growth “theology” nor by kingdom theology. In fact, their approach to growth was not based on much theological reflection at all. These churches have not evaluated if their growth has been by conversion, transfer, or biological means. Even if they are growing by conversion, they do not know how many new converts are in their midst because they are not providing them care, and this oversight is creating nominal Christians. These churches show a pragmatic desire for growth, but not a yearning for growth (Van Engen 1984).

This dissertation has shown the importance of Church Growth research to evaluate growth. The study has shown the importance of asking the following questions: Who are our guests, the newcomers? Where do they come from? Why do they come? When did they come? How do they come? Where are they six months later? How and

where are they growing in their faith and receiving care? Who are those deserters? What happened to those deserters (the conflict)? Where are those deserters now? These questions (among others) were explored by following a longitudinal approach including qualitative and quantitative research to follow-up with newcomers. This shows a different way to do Church Growth, from the traditional approach of studying growth charts and interviewing new converts.

A local church does not grow by itself; it is a matter of the church: (1) yearning for conversion growth as a matter of wanting to be a witness of the Kingdom in the world; (2) trusting that the Holy Spirit will work through Christ's body in the world to bring growth; (3) believing that this co-participation in God's mission implies the local church contextually organizing itself to be inclusive and hospitable; (4) understanding that the growth of the church is a sign that points that the King has come and His kingdom in its fullness is coming. Thus, the growth of the church is one element of God's mission, but not the only one. (5) Understanding that marketing is a tool, but it must not replace God's mission to guide the church to impact the world. (6) There are multiple dimensions for the church to achieve growth. Numerical growth is just one dimension.

“Although the easiest route to growth often involves attracting similar people, the message of social reconciliation can easily be lost” (Kraybill 2003, 217). For the sake of fast numeric growth, some congregations may have overlooked that its gospel comprises transforming social relationships and welcoming strangers regardless of their social “square.” A careful balance is what the researcher seeks to communicate in this dissertation. Newcomers need to be included into the life of the church both through hospitality (belonging first), or through evangelization (believing first). Newcomers need

to participate in the life in the church, and the church must facilitate as soon as possible that connection between newcomers and church members.

Newcomers must be counted, be cared for, and provided with a space to belong and to serve at church. Thus, membership is important! Churches should document their growth and decline in order to develop strategies for avoiding nominal Christianity.¹⁰⁶ In part, this has been the problem among the Costa Rican churches under study. They do not know (or do not want to know) that they are in the middle of non-growth and facing nominal Christianity.

The Kingdom and the Church

As was stated in chapter one, the Kingdom cannot be identified with the church, but this does not mean that the Kingdom is not present in the church. In other words, the Kingdom shapes the church, works through the church, and it is proclaimed in all creation by the church. Believing that “God’s Kingdom” is an eschatological concern only, and something that has no practical connection or relation with the local church in mission, then that is a wrong doctrine. That was a problem of the churches under study in this dissertation. However, is this lack of practical connection (i.e., strategies) a theological limitation within Kingdom theology as such, or a lack of theological application in behalf of the pastors? The researcher believes it is both. The church must be the agent and sign of God’s kingdom in the world!

The church contains what it signifies: a community in which the kingdom of God is already present and mediated to all who meet this community. The church as an icon of the Trinity brings forth that unity with the Triune God and with one another for which the kingdom of God is the perfect expression. . . . We should never separate the kingdom from the church because the church is God’s chosen instrument for God’s kingdom here on earth. (Fuellenbach 2006, 88-89)

Thus, kingdom theology should provide content and purpose to the assimilation, evangelization, and discipleship activities of the church. For instance, in the case of assimilation, the hospitality of the Kingdom is shown in the many parables of Jesus, the missionary strategies of Jesus in Luke (Luke 10), and the apostles reproducing those strategies for table fellowship at homes in Acts (10, 16, 18). That is, the church is sent to abide in the world and welcome (or be welcomed) by those who seek God. This is kingdom hospitality!

Jesus, then, becomes the Lord of the household, where hospitality was shared across ethnic, social, gender and age boundaries. The church, as agent of the Kingdom, is called to become a hospitable and nurturing community for an unjust, discriminatory, segregated, and classist world. Assimilation/inclusion is about welcoming people to the Kingdom, not just to the church. People are looking for a place to belong, and the church must reproduce the values of the Kingdom, the heritage of hospitality. Thus, the church must facilitate that reconciling encounter between God and those who need to experience the reconciling presence of Christ, through the church.

Pohl and Hershberger provide important suggestions that a local church can utilize to make its space more hospitable: “hospitable places are comfortable and lived in inviting entrances and accessible facilities, comfortable furnishings and adequate lighting” (Pohl 1999, 152, 153). “Churches that have not nurtured a common life among members will find hospitality to strangers quite difficult” (Pohl 1999, 157). “All welcoming details—signs about where bathrooms are, name tags for the ushers, a follow-up visit from someone from the church—are acts of ministry” (Hershberger 1999, 192).

Reviewing Theories for Assimilation/Inclusion

This section will include a summary of the findings in this dissertation enriched with its theoretical framework. They are presented as suggestions for training Costa Rican church leaders about the reality of church assimilation and inclusion. The first section discusses the reasons Costa Ricans come to church, dropout of church, and stay in church. Then, there is a section that discusses the menace of inactivity and nominality for the Costa Rican churches.

Reasons for Those Who Come, Drop-Out, or Stay in Church

People may come, drop-out, or keep attending church for many reasons. In our case, fifty-eight percent of the evangelical informants in this dissertation were looking to improve their spiritual life, and that is the reason they came to church. Others were looking for membership (four informants), and two others were looking to see if they would like the church.

This hunger to improve their spiritual life may have to do with life change (crisis) experiences like "significant change in religious beliefs," "lost or changed jobs," and "changed homes" which comprised half of the total multiple responses. The informants facing these social readjustments came to or were invited to the church, which makes sense considering what was going on in their life. Most of them, however, were already evangelicals, meaning that maybe they were nominal Christians, and a change in their lifestyle motivated them to come back to church. Rainer and Rainer state that the main reason drop-outs leave and come back to church is the same: life changes. "Church

attendance can become a cycle. Life changes; they leave. Life changes; they come back. Another life change and they may be gone for good” (2008, 90).

Generally, we can find three kinds of people who come to church: those who decide not to return after one visit or two, those who attend for a while and even join the church but fall in inactivity or end up in another church, and finally those who after visiting for a while join the local congregation. Now these insights are difficult to measure in some churches, like all evangelical churches in this study, because they do not keep a roster of people. That is, they do not have a membership system to keep track of people. Thus, they do not know who comes and goes as newcomers or oldcomers. This lack of data really limits a good diagnosis of each local church to develop a study on drop-outs and assimilation.

Those who drop-out do so for many reasons. Schaller states that one third to one half of the members of all Protestant churches in the United States do not feel they fit or belong where they are members (1978, 16). The local church, however, should not make sure that none of those reasons or excuses are based on lack of care. Yet, the evangelical churches described here were guilty of a lack of care of newcomers or guests. The program for closing the back door exodus begins at the front door. This is important for an assimilation system.

The best way to prevent backdoor losses is to connect newcomers with meaningful support groups (Harre 1984, 32). In all of the case studies, only CEZ had small group ministry. People need a sense of belonging not just with the church at large, but with a small group of friends. This sense of belonging (that “we” gut-feeling) through time develops into service (when the person becomes an active member). Those less

likely to dropout are those involved as volunteers at church, those willing to meet other newcomers, and those involved in social action or outreach activities.

The Menace of Inactivity and Nominality

The categories of “activity” and “inactivity,” however, need to be reviewed. This should not mean just attending church services, but getting people involved in God’s mission. A good system of assimilation is the best way to avoid back-door problems and inactive members becoming Christians in name only. Inactivity happens as a process, as well as suddenly, through causes of internal or external life crises (Haugk 1989, 17). Let us remember that people come to church, and quit attending church, because of facing life crises.

According to John Savage (1990), life crisis may take place as one critical incident at church when the feelings of the person were hurt, or something shameful in the life of a person happened and pushed the person not to come back to church. The shameful or painful experience becomes hurt and anger. During the interviews of the drop-outs from the evangelical churches, these feelings were revealed by the informants.

What should the church do about inactive members? Haugk suggests the importance of developing an inactive member ministry,¹⁰⁷ because active members tend to assume about their inactivity, instead of showing care to inactive members (1989, 19-20). The church must seek out inactive members, listen to them (if necessary have different meetings), and make them feel wanted and cared for.¹⁰⁸ “When an inactive member lets loose with deep feelings, whether anger or something else, that is an extremely positive sign. Deep feelings mean deep care” (Haugk 1989, 134).

Gibbs (1994, 32) developed a scale of commitment to explain nominality, which was explained and cited earlier in this dissertation (Chapter 1). Now, considering the findings of this dissertation the researcher would modify Gibb's scale as follows:

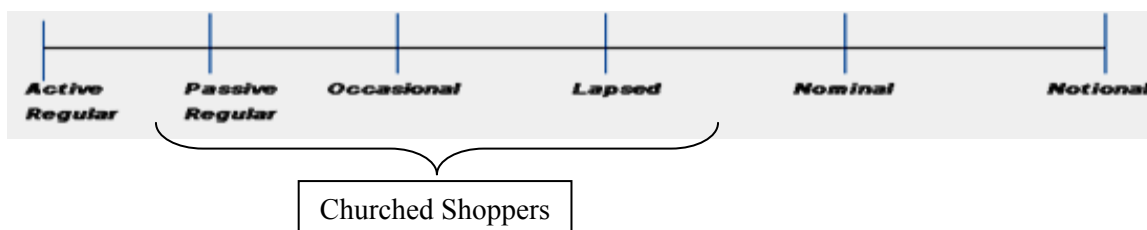


Figure 14. Churched Shoppers within the “Scale of Commitment” by Gibbs (1994, 32)

The interesting characteristic of churched shoppers in Costa Rica is that they remain active church visitors, visiting more than one church at the time (nomads) and participating in some activities, but not making a commitment to any church. They were never assimilated, or disciplined; and if they were somehow assimilated and disciplined, they probably were spiritually abused, or hurt by a church leader or church structure.

Almost 60% of those already evangelicals, as church visitors, were churched shoppers in the case studies researched in this dissertation. That is, the evangelical churches under study had a case of a recycling crowd. Churched shoppers seemed to be difficult to maintain in one church. Their nature is to shop around. For instance, our evangelical churches under study invited them to activities and programs but only 56.5% of the informants responded to those invitations. What if the church invites and the churched shoppers do not respond? This happened in our case studies. The researcher believes that the lack of response to invitations may be an early sign of nominalism, and that these churched shoppers may show signs of being burned out, apathetic, and bored of “doing” church.

Costa Rica has been experiencing this problem of nominalism for over a decade. The researcher Jorge Gomez states that one fifth of evangelicals and one third of Roman Catholics can be considered nominal members of those churches (1996, 33). So, is the church in Costa Rica growing? There has been an elusive problem in the country. The church keeps growing but not as fast as the growth of the population when percentages are considered. Therefore, the problem of nominalism has not been taken seriously because the chairs or pews are filled every Sunday, and every year more chairs and pews have to be added. However, that “growth” does not diminish the problem of nominalism, as discussed in chapter eight. In a few words, inactive members and nominalism take place when churches have no assimilation system, and when believers get burned out because of over commitment and unreasonable expectations, or because of conflict and abuse in the church.

Another problem with our churched shoppers is that they do not practice evangelism, but they may invite people to join them at church. Throughout the five months when the visitors attended church, 75% of them invited, at least once, others to church and 23% did not. Now, it is expected that within churches that have any kind of assimilation program in place, their people may feel motivated to invite others to church. That is the case of CEZ, a church with expectations of growth. 71% of the informants invited others (let us remember that their assimilation program is not for visitors). VA does not have a program of assimilation and approximately 32% of the informants were motivated to invite others to church. The House church shows little action in their visitors with low percentages of those responding yes or no.

Keeping a Membership System Reduces Back-Door Loss and Improves Assimilation

A church using a proper assimilation system would communicate to newcomers that they are needed to serve in God's mission, and the church should provide many opportunities for those to become involved, according to their limitations, giftedness and environment. This provides a great opportunity for members and newcomers to rub shoulders, and for newcomers to have a taste of the importance of membership. A sense of belonging strengthens a sense of ownership, which even allows people to belong before they believe.¹⁰⁹

Membership is something that needs to be taught at church, and regular sign-ups and membership classes should be offered as often as possible.

Once you start this process, you may want to change some other things. Just imagine that you can change your system of assimilation, and as you find yourself keeping more people, you start reaching out with stronger evangelism and then start stepping up your weekly services and small groups. Your church would suddenly become more effective than ever, because you acted on a decision to stop taking your first-time guest for granted. (Searcy 2007, 161)

Moreover, in this case of membership the church has to consider that "counting" people are neither *numerology* nor a way to measure success. It is abusive to count if the reason a church counts is to measure success, or for budget purposes like in the case of CEZ, and VA. Counting, however, as a form of stewardship, for caring reasons and because each number represents one person, is a good and necessary practice. On the one hand, VA had no records of people, and that reflected in their way to provide poor care. On the other hand, none of the evangelical churches in this study kept records of newcomers. How can they improve their assimilation strategy without knowing who comes and goes? If they are not missed, how will anyone show them care or follow up?

Within this topic of counting, the church should consider the importance of membership. A member is that person who identifies with the church programs, services,

and needs. It is someone who knows about stewardship, spiritual growth, commitment, and above all identifies himself with God's kingdom. That is why high expectations on members are necessary.

“Effective assimilation churches have one primary characteristic that sets them apart from churches that do not keep their members in active involvement. Effective assimilation churches had high expectations of all of their members” (Rainer 1999, 23). The JW had high expectations of their members related to right behavior and preaching hours. CEZ had expectations on members to participate in *La Visión* that contributed to church growth. None of them, however, had expectations on providing follow up to newcomers. The high expectation these evangelical churches need to develop is an expectation to participate in God's mission, not simply a focus on church attendance. When expectations are low, commitment is low. The high-expectation church expects much and, thus, receives much from its members. As a result, the church exodus is minimized” (Rainer and Rainer 2008, 6).

The Grace Margin Model: Helping the Local Church being Inclusive

The “grace margin” model (Law 2000) can help those churches that seek to extend God's grace by including the other “out there,” or the stranger. The importance of having a strategy for inclusiveness is that it helps congregations that have never tried to be inclusive to do so progressively. For instance, three evangelical churches under study in this dissertation recognized the importance of giving attention to the newcomer, but did not consider this as an essential practice for the church. For example, a leader at CEZ said, “following up visitors is an area we need to improve; however, it is not that important because it is not part of the process of *La Visión*.” Another leader at VA

expressed that “following up is one of our weaknesses; however, what are we going to do with all that information? We cannot follow up each person.” The pastor at HC said, “following up visitors is important, but we do not get many visitors.” These churches need a strategy to take the first step toward inclusiveness. The “grace margin” model helps churches to understand and take these steps.

Helping the local church develop this table-fellowship attitude is necessary for creating a strategy to welcome the Kingdom’s guests. According to Law every community has boundaries. These boundaries mark who belongs and who does not. Boundaries may provide protection and uphold the identity and vitality of the community. Groups construct boundaries against “others” through attitudes like insecurities, legalism, and control. Thus, “exclusion, as a way to create boundaries, has its place in the preservation of the community, but it should not overshadow the work of including those who are outside the community. Inclusion of outsiders weighs much more than the preservation of the existing community” (2000, 14). Sometimes the boundary of a community gets too loose, resulting in the community accepting everyone without concerns. On other occasions, the boundary may be too tight, rejecting anyone who does not look like “us.”

Law describes the “grace margin”, as a model to transform “a community from within, moving from being an exclusive community toward being a gracious, inclusive body of Christ” (, xiii). This grace margin becomes an environment created by the local congregation to meet those from “the world out there” without compromising the safe zone. Thus, in order for the grace margin to exist, the community needs to step outside its safe zone and draw an outer parameter. Thus, three steps are necessary for the “grace

margin” to survive. First, a space and time to meet “outsiders” must be created. Some examples of this include programs like the Alpha Course, where non-believers are invited to a non threatening event; a special, non-worship event at church; a new “friendly” worship service; or activities where the church will reach out to its immediate neighborhood. Second, the church members need to develop a covenant that will enable them to articulate what they will and will not do in their use of that time. Finally, the community should be studying and raising up a variety of images and concepts of God on Kingdom hospitality (Law 2000, 83).

Once church leaders have been able to (1) consider the tension between the growth of the church and the growth of the Kingdom, (2) reflect upon those practices that may challenge and affect the church culture, and (3) agree upon the importance of creating a grace margin to meet strangers, they may be able to understand the following strategic suggestions for a system of assimilation among the Costa Rican churches.

Recommendations for a System of Assimilation/Inclusion

This section is structured to present a series of recommendations for assimilation. First, eight general recommendations were drawn from the literature and will be presented as suggestions for Costa Rican churches to consider in preparing to welcome guests. These are followed by a series of specific recommendations for welcoming guests at the Moments Of Truth (MOT) by Gary McIntosh. Finally, from all these recommendations the researcher will suggest a series of strategies integrating Church Growth and Kingdom theology principles, ending the chapter with recommendations for further research.

General Recommendations for a System of Assimilation/Inclusion

First, in order to prepare to welcome God's guests, the local church must recognize that Costa Rican church history is impregnated with religious neocolonialism. Ecclesiological contextualization is a great challenge, considering the church's historical background of understanding the church as something foreign whose doctrine has to be accepted. Culturally, the convert just attended church simply to be considered "Christian." "Successful" models of an imported "church in a box," and bigger churches (international or national) buying small churches as franchises are temptations that need to be confronted in order for the Costa Rican church to truly respond to today's challenges.

Second, the local church should seek to understand the cultures that surround it and to respond to constant cultural and social shifts within a competitive religious market. Marketing is a valuable tool, but it must not direct the church, in order to avoid consumerism and program driven strategies that may diminish God's mission (e.g., the megachurches under study in this dissertation). Thus, the Costa Rican church needs to recognize that it must be guided by God's mission to affect the world, understanding that the relevance of the church is declining. Church leaders in Costa Rica need to be challenged to develop contextual internal structures for church renewal.

Third, the local church needs to understand that God's mission includes the church with the purpose to affect the world (the whole cosmos, beyond only "spiritual" matters) with the redeeming grace of the Holy Spirit. The church, as a missional community in the world, finds itself within the metanarrative of table-fellowship. Thus, it understands that in order for God to redeem God's creation, the church has a role as sign

and agent of that mission and yearns for growth. Therefore, the church as the people of God must go into the world incarnationally to actively welcome those unaware of being long time guests of the Kingdom (e.g., receptivity principle). The Costa Rican church should develop its own contextual strategies and structures to mobilize its people to engage the world, to go out into the world inviting people not to simply join the church, but to join the Kingdom.

Fourth, the local church should not be afraid of using Church Growth research for self-evaluation. Church Growth studies present important tools that help in revealing unperceived weaknesses within the church (Van Rheenen 2004, 185). A simple way of interviewing newcomers and following them up is one way to know who is coming to visit. “I believe [McGavran] considered numerical analysis as a tool, a ‘thermometer’ (a word McGavran himself used on several occasions), that demonstrated where there was need for reevaluation and for a change in mission strategy to bring renewed focus and health to the mission enterprise” (Van Engen 2004, 192).

Fifth, the local church needs to understand its sense of unity, that “glue” or organizing principle,¹¹⁰ and how it works as part of its culture (see chapter one). Costa Rican churches need to understand that that sense of unity, intentionally or unintentionally, tends to exclude newcomers from joining in. This is the human side of churches. This sense of unity is important for the church, and when a local congregation grows, their unity is going to need reinforcement, because organizing principles tend to fade away and need to be replaced or reformulated. If the local church does not understand what provides its sense of unity, then it will never understand how it excludes people. Some sense of unity is easier to confront and modify than others. Kingdom

narratives can help the local church confront those “sense of unity” that bring unity but may also be very exclusionary, such as denomination, nationality, ethnicity, liturgy, heritage, social class identity; and kinfolk ties. “In general, the stronger the inclusive and cohesive factors, the more likely the average visitor will not feel welcome” (Schaller 1980, 36). Here is important to recall the grace margin model, because it is important for the congregation to define its boundaries in order to balance its sense of unity, with a sense of inclusion.

Sixth, besides challenging those organizing principles with Kingdom narratives, the local church can develop a “grace margin” (see above) to encounter God’s guests (Law 2000). The people of God need to recognize the reality that the local church constructs its culture with elements it brings from the world. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within each cultural mosaic are real and represent a challenge to the local church that wants to be inclusive. If the Costa Rican church wants to expand itself beyond its social and cultural boundaries (e.g., homogenous unit principle), then it needs to work harder in its inclusiveness.

Seventh, the local church should develop periodical training sessions in evangelism, assimilation/inclusion and discipleship. There needs to be a balance between programs to meet the needs of the current members, as well as programs for outreach. Every member of the people of God understands the importance of her participation in the Kingdom and in the strategy of the “grace margin”. This is a reality that Costa Rican churches need to embrace: empowering the people of God for serving in the world; and to remember that “the locus of outreach is no longer primarily the church building, but the communities where the church members live, work, and socialize” (Gibbs 1994, 242).

Eighth, if the Costa Rican church desires to lower the anxiety level of newcomers on their first visit, then it needs to be prepared in every detail to provide a good impression of hospitality. There must be training of God's people also for kindness and smiles, as well as preparation of the setting (e.g., signs, directions, and reserved spaces for visitors—in the parking lot and the sanctuary). That is, the pre-service, at-service, and post-service impressions count very much for the guest (see Bast, Searcy, and McIntosh). How prepared in every detail are the people of God to receive God's guests?

Specific Recommendations for Assimilation/Inclusion

In order to prepare the church for God's guests, local churches need to be intentional and adapt specific strategies to their context. Gary McIntosh (2006) and Nelson Searcy (2007) developed ways of evaluating the friendliness of a church. McIntosh mentions that every time guests enter a church they encounter certain standard Moments Of Truth (MOT). Searcy's perspective on assimilation relates very well with McIntosh's. For instance, the first four MOTs of McIntosh could be related to what Searcy calls "the pre-service," referring to the time before the worship service begins. Using McIntosh's and Searcy's strategies, suggestions will now be given for how the churches in this study might improve their assimilation/inclusion of newcomers.

According to Searcy, the high level of anxiety a visitor experiences in visiting a new church pushes the person to unconsciously make gut-level judgments; feelings are at work more than reasoning for any newcomer. The pre-service is about impressions. "Seven minutes is all you get to make a positive first impression. In the first seven minutes of contact with your church, your first-time guests will know whether or not they are coming back. That's before a single worship song is sung and before a single word of

the message is uttered” (Searcy 2007, 47). This pre-service has four initial areas of contact that each church can control: how the guests are (1) greeted (welcomed with a smile), (2) directed (simply and politely shown to where they need to go), (3) treated (shown respect and surprised with comfort food/drink), and (4) seated (led to comfortable, appropriate seats). For instance, even though the researcher has been a church goer for over 35 years, when he visited the case study churches for the first time, it was still about first impression moments. Costa Rican churches need to learn to see themselves through the eyes of newcomers.

McIntosh describes Moments Of Truth (MOT), and several of these can be considered as elements of the pre-service. The first MOT is in receiving an invitation to the church, usually from a friend or family member. None of the churches in this study were intentional about encouraging members to invite their friends and family to come to church with them. There seemed to be an expectation that members would extend these invitations, but this was not happening. A second MOT happens when people are driving by the church setting and driving into the facility. Traffic, landscaping, parking lots, signs, exterior walls and windows are important. All of these things make an impression on the visitor and affect how they feel when they first come to the church.

For the smaller churches studied in this dissertation the location of their setting made it difficult for anyone to find them, thus increasing the anxiety level of a newcomer. The HC would likely not have any signs since they meet in a home, but in this case it is even more important that the first MOT happens and that members make an intentional effort to help visitors find the home where the church meets. Both megachurches studied are located in high traffic areas, and their buildings are visible with good signage. At VA,

the parking lot was more abundant than CEZ. For both, the landscaping was poor and not very attractive, and the exterior walls and windows of the sanctuary did not indicate that they were churches. From the road, VA looks more like a private elementary school building, while CEZ looks more like a private high school campus. All of this may affect the first impressions made on visitors to these churches.

For both McIntosh and Searcy the following two areas of contact are even more crucial than the previous ones. “Surveys reveal that 75 percent of people say they are more anxious the first time they enter a new place, such as a business, church, or office, than at most other times in their life” (McIntosh 2006, 35). A third MOT happens when someone is simply walking to the front door. As soon as the visitor gets out of the car and walks to the front door, the feeling of being totally lost may be felt. Signs are needed. None of the congregations in this study had any signs once you drove into the parking area. For a newcomer, like the researcher, the feeling was like visiting a stadium for the first time, especially in the megachurches. All of the churches in this study could improve their welcome to newcomers simply by intentionally and creatively adding better signage in their setting and facilities.

The next MOT happens upon entering the front door of the church building. Even inside the setting, none of the congregations had signs (besides the exit signs in case of fire) to help one at least find the bathrooms. Among all of the groups studied, entering the front door was a time of high anxiety. There were ushers at the door who may smile at you and give you the program, but then you had to move on to find your own seat. In the megachurches, it was often difficult to find a seat. This is not a visitor friendly church. The JW does a better job of this because members bring their proselytes to worship, and

they are treated as guests. They do not expect visitors to just stop in to their church because their system is designed for guests to come with other members after spending time in a Bible study in their home. Therefore, at the door they quickly approach strangers and seek to make them welcome, but they expect that you are a guest of someone in the church, not a random visitor. At HC, the feeling was more uncomfortable because one is entering a private home and there was nobody at the door. They definitely have not been expecting visitors, but maybe guests invited by their own people. In sum, when you have invited guests to your home, you prepare to receive those guests, perhaps by cleaning your home and preparing a meal. Costa Rican churches need to have an attitude of expecting guests and make preparations to make guests feel welcome if they want to receive visitors well in the church.

As soon as one enters the place of worship, in all the religious groups, there were no assigned seats for visitors. One has to find one's own seat, and often this is a challenge. For the researcher, who is a Christian and has visited many churches, this was a time of high anxiety: Where does one sit? There should be parking spaces and assigned seats for guests. This is one way to expect guests to come and prepare for welcoming them.

The next MOT comes in meeting people. People at the megachurches were not outgoing and relational. It was like being in a stadium where everyone is essentially anonymous. At the small religious groups, the environment allowed for more interaction, but even it was not very friendly. Offering kindness and friendliness to the stranger is one practical way to explain what hospitality is, and Costa Rican churches need lots of help in this area.

Another MOT can be found in experiencing ministries and services. Only VA indicated and allowed around two minutes during their worship time for parents to take their children to their programs. Again, one had to follow the crowd. At CEZ it seemed like one had to guess that there is a children's program taking place somewhere in the other building. Childcare or child classes at the megachurches were a challenge. There were hundreds of parents, and there was no system for child protection, such as parents signing their children in and out. It was common to see children playing around the buildings while the parents were at worship. There was more control of infant care, but overall there was very little sense of security given. A sense of security is felt when the organizational culture of any church emphasizes caring for the least ones like children, the elderly, pregnant couples, and the stranger.

Even entering the sanctuary is described as an MOT. Among all the religious groups only CEZ had ushers, but they had so much to carry with them that attending to the visitor was not a priority. This may be because the church's emphasis for the ushers is for them to minister to and collect information about new converts. In other words, as soon as the visitor enters the sanctuary she is on her own. It is necessary to train church members in Costa Rica to be hospitable in these seemingly small matters because that is Kingdom business.

Participating in the worship service is the next MOT. Due to its Pentecostal background CEZ allowed spiritual experiences that could confuse or scare a newcomer. The music, however, for the participants was engaging. For the researcher, it was like being in a concert of a band you do not know, but everybody else seemed to enjoy. In the evangelical churches, during the middle of the worship in a matter of no more than two

minutes, first-time visitors were asked to raise their hands, were welcomed by the worship leader, and that was it. HC was the worst environment because the visitor is asked to stand up and introduce himself, and even the worship leader asked personal questions. None of the evangelical groups in this dissertation is structured to follow up on guests, and that is not acceptable from a Kingdom perspective.

Exiting the worship service is also a MOT. In a matter of 30 minutes (or less) after worship the megachurches were empty. The only exception to this was found after the late morning Sunday worship where it seemed like those who have been at the church for a long time liked to attend because they did share with each other longer times of fellowship. Leaving the megachurches was like leaving a stadium. It was a nightmare of people and cars, everyone rushing to get home. Among the small churches things were different. At JW, most of the people came from the neighborhood but far from church, and they paid public buses to take them home. So, they had to wait for the buses, and meanwhile relate to each other. At the HC, almost every Sunday they had a small meal after worship and people would stay for over one hour, sharing and fellowshiping.

Finally, the last two MOTs do not apply among the churches studied because they are not put into practice. McIntosh lists being contacted during the week and ongoing contacts in the future as important MOTs. So, a visitor at any of these churches might experience the feeling of misplacement and ask themselves, “Is there room for me?”; “Does someone care about me?”; “Is this worth it?”; “Is this what I have to go through to come closer to God?” Now, it is up to the visitor to get in contact with the church if he or she wants to come back.

In light of this, the churches in Costa Rica would benefit from having a clear follow-up strategy. When the first-time guest comes to church, he or she should be invited from the pulpit to fill out a welcome/contact card and also to visit the welcome table outside the sanctuary in order to receive a small token of appreciation for visiting.¹¹¹ This is also a good place to get in contact with the guest and inform them of church activities and ministries.

After the first church experience, the guest will receive an email and a phone call by a non-staff leader within 36 hours of attending the church service. If it is an email, this will include a link to an online survey that encourages feedback from the first visit and connects the person to the local church's website. If it is a phone call, which is the most culturally appropriate way to get in touch in Costa Rica, the non-staff leader will ask some questions and pray for the guest's needs (if any).

After the second-time visit, the guest is motivated to fill out the contact card again. Only members are not motivated to fill out this card. The above approach of email or phone call is repeated, but this time they seek to inform the person about small group activities and other opportunities for service. After the third-visit, the previous steps are continued. This time the focus is on getting the person connected in a small group, special upcoming gatherings, and other opportunities for service outside or inside the church.

Next, the guest, in becoming a regular attendee, is motivated to sign up for service teams, ministries, baptism, and/or membership classes, all on a weekly basis according to the church calendar of activities. Also, the regular attendee is invited to participate in training sessions on evangelism, inviting, assimilation/inclusion, and discipleship.

In summary, believing that welcoming visitors to church equals hospitality is erroneous. Hospitality is something that is both taught and caught. Hospitality must be part of the organizational culture of the church. As part of that change of culture, there must be a change of vocabulary. McIntosh suggests eliminating the term “visitor” from our church vocabulary and changing it to “guest” (2006, 13). “Visitors are often unwanted; guests are expected. Visitors just show up; guests are invited. Visitors are expected to leave; guests are expected to stay. Visitors come one time; guests return again” (McIntosh 2006, 14).

Strategies for Assimilation/Inclusion

In this section strategies for assimilation/inclusion, based on the literature review and the field study for this dissertation, will be suggested. The gospels remind us that the Kingdom of God came near by the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ the King. The mission of Christ, and as default the mission of the church, is to claim as His everything and everyone in the world and to provide reconciliation.¹¹² This cosmic message is integral in its mission.¹¹³ Thus, Christ came to set things right, God’s rule spells justice.¹¹⁴ The church, however, needs to remember that God is the one who sends.¹¹⁵ Therefore, we may understand the message of the Kingdom as good news of salvation in terms of shalom to all creation.¹¹⁶

This *Kingdom theology* challenges the church to submit unconditionally to Christ’s authority, not to any human or organizational authority for mission. This can be the main barrier for any local church to achieve God’s purposes to affect the world; the church needs to redefine the meaning of leadership. Biblical texts provide evidence of the plurality and distribution of power in the church (i.e., elders) and the communal decision

making efforts to use that power. Thus, the church needs to allow the Spirit to equip and call every believer, according to the spiritual gifts to engage in mission (i.e., the priesthood of all believers). Christian communities, as a new creation, need to develop synergistic structures for mutual care, worship, accountability, and to discern spiritual gifts and ministries.¹¹⁷ The history of Christianity in Costa Rica, as in many other nations, is impregnated with the abuse of religious power and neocolonial ways for doing and being church.

From an ecclesiological perspective, there is nothing wrong with the church yearning for growth.¹¹⁸ However, this growth must be multidimensional and seek Kingdom growth.¹¹⁹ Kingdom growth takes place by the church affecting the world, not just by the increase of numeric church attendance. Thus, the growth of the church may happen by being attractational, but most importantly it should grow by being missional, where non-believers may find Christ through meeting Christ's body (i.e., the church).¹²⁰

People may quit coming to church (and maybe look for another) because of an interpersonal conflict at church¹²¹ and because of inactivity.¹²² Church shoppers were an interesting phenomenon that the researcher found while interviewing newcomers. This behavior of having a church of preference, while at the same time attending other churches and showing no commitment to any, shows what inactivity and the lack of assimilation procedures can do among Christian churches. Inactivity is followed by nominalism, and nominalism is a fluctuating and selective condition.¹²³ Thus, if churches are facing the phenomenon of church shoppers, it is important to develop ministries for inactive Christians.¹²⁴

People often come to church because of two reasons: a friend or member of their family¹²⁵ invited them and/or in response to a personal life crisis.¹²⁶ People come to church looking for meaning in their lives.¹²⁷ When the person arrives the church must be prepared to receive not visitors, but God's guests. Providing care and attention to the newcomer before the service, during the service, and after the service is crucial for assimilation.¹²⁸ If a congregation needs help developing a system for hospitality towards assimilation, a biblical study of table fellowship passages can provide a church with a broader understanding of inclusion within the Kingdom of God.¹²⁹ Other organizational tools like the grace margin,¹³⁰ and MOTs¹³¹ can provide a good self-appraisal of hospitality for some congregations.

The size of the congregation is an important variable for assimilation strategies.¹³² The more people join, the more others leave. This is a challenge for larger congregations. The best way to narrow the back door exodus is at the front door.¹³³ The following aspects must be considered: people need a place to land,¹³⁴ thus the church must prayerfully plan for mission. This may take place by organizing multiple ports of entry in a contextual way, via reaching across social networks of credible believers, and by providing ways to minister to people's needs.¹³⁵ In addition, effective leadership, and high expectations¹³⁶ of newcomers to develop the priesthood of all believers by engaging them to participate in God's mission are the two most important elements to reduce the chances of any congregation to decline.¹³⁷

The reality that every church includes and excludes people has to be accepted. As much as every congregation may try to be inclusive to assimilate newcomers, no one church can do it.¹³⁸ In other words, that organizing principle or "glue" that unites a

congregation may turn certain people off.¹³⁹ The concept of homogeneous units challenge churches to plant more churches.¹⁴⁰ When churches do not assimilate their guests, two aspects are being neglected: First, newcomers becoming inactive (irregular attendance to church and low commitment in mission), followed by nominality;¹⁴¹ and second, there is no way for the church to identify receptive groups.¹⁴² When the local church does not know who is coming to pay a visit, that is a sign that its missional methods are not accomplishing God's purposes; and when the local church does not assimilate the newcomers, that is a sign that by rejecting God's guests the church is not participating in God's mission.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are several areas that need further research within the topic of assimilation in Costa Rica and other countries in Latin America. Case studies are useful in exploratory research where the purpose is to collect data to generate theory. That is, the conclusions of case study research help in generating hypotheses instead of using data to test a theory or hypothesis. This study has identified the following areas that may suggest several hypotheses for further research:

1. Phillip Jenkins said, "the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America" (2000, 2). This statement is partially true because today any researcher may find that in the two-thirds world the amount of "Christians" is larger than other parts of the planet. It is true that the church is growing, but not as fast as the population growth in Latin America. That is, this statement of Jenkins is not true in percentage numbers. In other words, one must be critical of these general statements if they are not backed-up with good

statistical research. Statements of this kind communicate that the church, at least in Latin America, is vibrant and healthy. This dissertation from the Costa Rican perspective questions this assumption and calls for deeper and further research in Latin America in regards to the true growth of the church.

2. On the one hand, Andrew Walls highlighted that “Third World theology is now likely to be the representative Christian theology” (2000, 9-10). On the other hand, Rene Padilla (1972) called Latin America a continent of a church with no theology.¹⁴³ Who is right? This dissertation provided a surface look at “successful models of churches” (megachurches) finding out that these churches have ecclesiological illnesses that need further research. If these churches represent what their leaders called “successful churches,” and what Walls may call a good representation of Christian theology in the world, then the future of world Christianity does not look very promising. The phenomenon of megachurches in Latin America, and the networks among megachurches in North, Central, and South America, are issues that need further research.
3. The evangelical churches under study (with no system of assimilation in place) were good creators churched shoppers (almost inactive members). Is the problem of nominalism and member inactivity that has been affecting Costa Rica for over a decade affecting other countries in Latin America as well? The fast growth of those who declare themselves with no religion, and the growth of nominal Christians (Roman Catholics and evangelicals) with no place to land are important areas for further research. After six months, almost all the informants in the exit interviews used in their language the “we-they” division. In this

dissertation six months was not enough time to evaluate if newcomers were being assimilated/included, because of (1) the interesting case of churched shopper-nomads who may resist being assimilated, and (2) all evangelical churches under study did not possess a system of assimilation. Further research is necessary to assess the prevalence and impact of the problem of nominalism and churched shoppers in Costa Rica.

4. If assimilation is important for the development of new Christians and for avoiding developing members' inactivity and nominalism, and if assimilation is not equivalent to evangelization or discipleship, then why have assimilation studies not received the importance they deserve? Evangelization studies and discipleship studies seem to work separately and not in a synergistic movement with assimilation studies. This synergistic relationship among these parts may be a good point for further studies.
5. Evangelical churches in Costa Rica may have lost the ability to welcome people. They may believe they have enough people and see no need for Church Growth principles. However, their growth has been by recycling nominal believers. These churches need to reshape their theology of why and how to welcome newcomers not just to the church, but also to the Kingdom. This lack of care for newcomers may be an indication of a poor theology and weak strategies for evangelization and discipleship. This connection between theologizing (hospitality-Kingdom theology) and developing strategies for ministerial praxis (among other church growth principles) is an area that needs more research.

6. Costa Rica, in its Latin American environment, is a country of contrasts. Church leaders are more connected to pragmatic and imported methods of Church Growth, rather than to developing a communal theologizing process for developing strategies for Kingdom growth. When the local churches begin to attend to the needs and questions of the surrounding socio-cultural context, a deep concern for reaching those who do not know Christ may move the church leaders to growth in their churches. Why are church-leaders more inclined to be successful instead of being faithful? Leadership studies are necessary to help us understand the development and impact of “shamanistic” leadership roles (or prophetic-apostleship type of leadership) that are dividing the church and creating syncretistic ecclesiologies in Latin American churches.
7. It was interesting to notice that the main market for the megachurches is middle class professionals. This is an example of the homogeneous unit principle at work! Is the gospel becoming a middle class ideology in Costa Rica? Is the crossing of societal and cultural barriers a prerequisite for a Costa Rican to become evangelical (e.g., middle class)? Are lower social classes effectively being reached by evangelical churches? This tendency of social class exclusiveness to assimilate “our kind of people” is an interesting issue for further research in Costa Rica because humans do build barriers around their own societies. “I would dare to say that even other churches which are not sociologically middle class tend to develop a middle class mentality” (Escobar 1991, 157 *translation mine*).

8. If any church wants to grow with Kingdom growth, besides a deep need to present the signs of the Kingdom in each context, Church Growth principles may be followed, instead of importing Church Growth methodologies out of context. Further research in Latin America is needed to help churches grow from a Kingdom perspective.
9. An assimilation system on its own will not impact the growth of any church. Further research is needed to correlate how the different systems¹⁴⁴ work with one another in synergy. In other words, the idea is to research a variety of systems and how they should relate to one another in order to provide a synergy of ministries for healthy growth in any church. Importing Church Growth techniques, like in the case of VA, shows that not all growth may be healthy, if ignoring the historical, sociological, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural factors that affect the local church.

Conclusion

Is this a Church Growth dissertation? Not really, but it is about church research. This dissertation does not represent in its theory nor in its methodology the traditional Church Growth research. On the one hand, Church Growth research has been criticized for its weak theology; on the other hand, Kingdom theology scholars have been criticized for their weak strategic suggestions for the local church. Both perspectives in the last decades have opposed each other in their understanding of the mission and nature of the Church, and both have shown weaknesses in their contextual approach for the local

church. While both perspectives have strengths and weaknesses, bringing their strengths together can help any local church, among other things, to provide a better assimilation/inclusion system.

This system can be summarized as helping people to move from: (a) being strangers to becoming God's guests, (b) being God's guests to the church actively pursue welcoming them as first-time guests at church, (c) being first-time guests to becoming second-time guests, (d) being second-time guests to becoming regular attendees, (e) being regular attendees to both becoming fully developing members, and becoming active citizens of God's kingdom. That is, where the newcomer (1) not only attends regularly the main church services, but also gets involved in participating in other church activities (e.g., small groups, retreats, trainings, ministry participation; (2) and studies and gets in contact with the specific beliefs of the group (myth); (3) and begins using the words/concepts that people in the group use; (4) and uses the concepts in phrases and sentences that sound like the themes that the church has emphasized; (5) and begins to act like people in the church in terms of practices and participation in rituals, (6) and begins to spend quality time with people from the group; and (7) for outreach purposes does not break those social networks with non-believer friends. Assimilation is not complete until newcomers get involved in mission. In other words, one learns a culture by participating in it, and once one develops a sense of belonging, one begins to acquire the values, beliefs, and cognitive categories of such culture by practicing those beliefs.

The hypothesis of this dissertation was that newcomers learn the culture of their religious group by participating in the activities and by acquiring the group's story. Insofar as newcomers learn to reproduce the culture of the new community, they show

identification with the community (that “we” feeling) and are more likely to stay in the community. If they are not included into the new community or do not learn to reproduce the culture, then they are likely to leave the community. This implies that guests and church leaders must work 50/50 in the process of assimilation, but the church needs to step up first and meet the guests where they are.

Facilitating relationships between newcomers and oldcomers is crucial for a good system of assimilation/inclusion in any local church. It is necessary for the church leaders to develop spots for service or new ministries for people. Newcomers should expect to be invited, cared for, and to develop a sense of belonging while participating. Believing that newcomers who want to connect to a church will do so on their own terms is a false assumption. “Effective churches spend more time caring for others than for themselves. This means, among other things, they build pathways of belonging for the new people coming their way” (McIntosh 2006, 144).

Churches need to be sensitive to the expectations of people who want to serve at church. For instance, people expect the following:

- a personal invitation to participate in ministry
- to be prepared and equipped for ministry
- follow-up, encouragement, and recognition
- service opportunities that fit their schedules
- that their unique skills and personality will contribute in a meaningful way
- to make a difference in their church, community, and world
- to build relationships
- to grow spiritually and personally
- to have their personal needs met. (Searcy 2007, 142-144)

The research problem in this dissertation asked the following question: which practices facilitate the process of religious assimilation/inclusion of a newcomer into the life of a religious group? The researcher sought to discover the implicit and explicit

activities and content of assimilation that different religious groups in Costa Rica utilized to include or welcome newcomers as participants in their fellowship. The researcher, however, found evangelical churches with no explicit process or system for the assimilation/inclusion of newcomers, and not even a process to provide contact or care to their own members.

The megachurch leaders (CEZ, VA) did not know who members were or who was visiting each Sunday. They did not seem to care, perhaps because their finances were good, and the sanctuary was full. The smaller congregations, like HC, had strong social barriers among its own members that did not allow them to grow. The Jehovah's Witnesses were more missional, reaching the unchurched, but cultural barriers like legalism, lack of contextualization, and high expectations became obstacles for its growth. In a few words, the researcher found inhospitable churches, with pragmatic practices for doing church following imported models of growth. It seems like much of the evangelical church in Costa Rica has been creating and reproducing nominal Christians, instead of growing by new converts becoming Kingdom members.

Thus, this case-study dissertation indicated that evangelical churches in Costa Rica may not pay enough attention to their kind of growth, its role in including guests, providing care to visiting church members and church members, and connecting guests to church members and vice versa. Because of a lack of a system of assimilation, any church in Costa Rica may face the menace of reproducing inactive members, who then become church members, and later become nominal Christians. Local churches, however, may not recognize this menace because they see their pews or chairs full every

Sunday. If they took time to research the situation, they might discover that their churches are full of evangelical nomads and very few new converts.

Kingdom theology allowed the researcher to ask deeper questions and have more solid theological principles for including God's guests into Christ kingdom. We have to recognize that on the one hand, Church Growth is not dead or out of fashion, but it can be theologically re-polished while rescuing its strategic power and application; and on the other hand, Kingdom theology can be taken out of the shelves of a library and made practical for the local church. By holding both in creative tension, these perspectives, once opposite of each other, can now work for the local church.

Notes

¹ According to Thumma and Travis a megachurch is a Protestant congregation that averages a minimum of two-thousand attendees to their weekly worship services (2007, xvii). This concept is applicable only to Protestant churches, which would be evangelical churches in the Latin American terminology. As well, the definition states that there should be a minimum of two thousand attendees, but this is not describing the number of actual church members or baptized adults, but, rather, it includes anyone who attends the church over the course of one week, including children who visit the midweek and weekend services.

² The highest desertion is given among new converts (1-2 years) (Gomez 1996, 80). Mainly during the first six months of conversion especially among men (Gomez 1996, 135).

³ “Approximately one of every two people who were Protestant in some period of their life has abandoned the church” (Gomez 1996, 133). 1/3 of the former Protestants were involved in a church during six months or less (, 52). Another 1/3 were involve during three years or more. Almost half of the Protestant deserters were involved in a church less than one year; and they attended only one church (Gomez 1996, 52, 55).

⁴ 1/5 of Protestants and a 1/3 of Catholics could be considered nominal members (Gomez 1996, 33).

- The highest desertion is given among new converts (Gomez 1996, 80).
- Women become Protestant more easily than men (Gomez 1996, 41).
- The desertion is higher among those within 18-24 year old population, and those 60 years and older (Gomez 1996, 41).
- Protestants are more efficient evangelizing born Catholics in the rest of the country, than those within the metropolitan area (Gomez 1996, 40).

⁵ A process of assimilation seeks to communicate a religious group’s culture in different ways that newcomers must acquire and reproduce as part of their own new reality. Assimilation is used also as a synonym for socialization, incorporation, and can be connected to inclusion (Kingdom hospitality).

⁶ Nevertheless, the researcher found two books where the authors challenge the term assimilation, and rather used the term incorporation. “For many the word assimilation implies the image of a melting pot, in which everyone gets blended into the whole until everyone looks, thinks, and acts the same” (Braden 1987, vii). “Incorporation [is] the process of helping newcomers feels socially comfortable with the church Assimilation [is] the process of helping newcomers feel cognitively assured that they are accepted, trusted members of the fellowship” (Cowell 1992, 11). I believe the authors have a good point. Most churches uncritically borrow their culture from their

surroundings, and that creates of every Sunday a sense of segregation. The latter author simply indicates that incorporation comes first and then assimilation follows. These arguments, however, were not strong enough to motivate the researcher to alter or change his definition of assimilation taken from the Church Growth tradition.

⁷ Those first six months during which the newcomer considers whether or not to remain as visitor, or not, are crucial. Costa Rican researcher Jorge Gomez found that "the highest probability in desertion takes place during the first six months of conversion, especially among the men" (1996, 135). This perspective rings true among Church Growth researchers in the United States. "New members not integrated into a church within those first six-months could already be on their way out the back door" (Arn 1987, 23). Developing new friends at church is directly related with remaining at church and later continuing as an active participant. "If after six months the new member can identify few or no close friends in the church, the chances are high that the person will soon be inactive" (Arn and Arn 1998, 143).

⁸ People may like the sermons at a church, but deciding to join a congregation seems to be more related to an emotional response or even what could be described as a "gut feeling." Building relationships, being cared for and caring for others, is about nurturing that "gut feeling." Therefore, if good visceral theology is applied to caring and being cared for, then we have good assimilation theology.

⁹ Gailyn Van Rheenen recognizes this: "The concepts of GOC [Gospel and our Culture], however, are too lofty, too difficult for local leaders to apply. For example, a church leader without a theological education will find *The Missional Church*, written by six GOC scholars and edited by Darrell Guder, hard to understand. The GOC desperately needs a popular guide to missional thinking" (McIntosh 2004, 115).

¹⁰ Let us remember that desertion is the result of a poor assimilation.

¹¹ Yin describes four types of case study designs, which include a single-case or multiple-case study, and within each of these there may be a holistic design (a single unit of analysis) or an embedded design (multiple units of analysis) (Yin 1994, 38). This dissertation will utilize a *multiple-case embedded design* because it will study four different religious communities, each one with different units of analysis. This multiple-case design is based on a logic of replication, rather than a logic of sampling. Therefore, each case must be selected such that it "either (a) predicts similar results (a *literal replication*) or (b) produces contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a *theoretical replication*)" (Yin 1994, 46). The selection of the cases will be discussed in the data collection section.

¹² A community meeting is what any evangelical would understand as "any expression of public worship."

¹³ The work of John Savage explains how an active church member, a few years later, becomes inactive. Reasons are, primarily, facing a conflict with the pastor, other church

members, and with family members, as causes of anxiety, and result on people leaving the church or getting inactive. This is the problem with the apathetic or bored church member: “the inability to cope in a setting of high anxiety,” thus they behave in that way to survive under stress or conflict (1990, 65). In the beginning they tend to blame others, and then blame themselves. First they become helpless, hopeless (angry because the external environment does not support his cry for help), then both apathetic and bored (loss of meaning), and end up leaving the church.

¹⁴ I want to leave this interview with the pastor and lay leaders until the end of the study because as a participant observer I inductively want to capture the phenomenon as an outsider, like a newcomer might do.

¹⁵ This socialization takes place when newcomers participate in communal rituals where the community of believers are framing and displaying the meaning of Christianity (the more satisfactory the experience, the stronger the mood that religion develops in people). Therefore, participation of a newcomer in the group’s life, and the acquisition of cultural meanings is what culture learning means.

¹⁶ Through language, people learn culture and how to behave, what to feel, what to think, and how to express themselves. This is the same process through which a newcomer learns to interact with others and acquire a new set of practices. A religious group can teach these things through verbal and non-verbal language to any newcomer, although it is unlikely that any religious group is self-aware of what they are doing.

¹⁷ Social interactionism explains that in order to interact it is necessary for humans to interpret behavior in a reflexive way. That is, the participants in a social interaction look at themselves as actors on a stage, studying the way they present aspects of themselves to others and following unspoken rules learned through life. In this way the *self* and the *other* interact, shaping each other’s cognition, values, and social norms. This interaction is symbolic because it takes place through gestures and language. Moreover, it is in the midst of this social interaction that people construct a way to understand reality.

¹⁸ “From a discursive point of view, socialization tactics also refers to the ways that discourse organizes the kinds of relationships and identities individuals establish with the organization” (Barge and Schlueter 2004, 4).

¹⁹ Congregations do not develop their cultures out of nothing, recalling Ammerman (1997). They have “stores” from which they borrow their ingredients, like their religious or theological tradition, and the larger social and cultural environment to which they belong (the rhythm of their music, order and timing, arrangement of the space, and code of dress). From this social and cultural environment they acquire demographic and social structures (occupation, education, ethnicity, and residence). These aspects are important to understand because people bring their social and cultural expectations to church.

²⁰ Levinson summarizes a model for the adult socialization of an individual in an organization in the following points:

(1) The organization, seen as a socializing environment. (2) The organization who occupy the position of client-member (student, patient, inmate). (3) The socialization process: the evolving engagement of the client-members in the life of the socializing system (and related environments). (4) The outcome of socialization: the kinds of psychosocial change induced in the members as direct or indirect result of their participation in the system. The crucial question here is: In what ways have the members become differently equipped to function in the roles they embark upon after ‘graduation’? The characteristics of the advance students, and the staff, in turn shape the character of the organization and we come full circle with component (1), above. (Levinson 1967, 261)

²¹ “Church growth was criticized at several points: reliance on segregated homogeneous units, separation of conversion from spiritual formation, reliance on numerical growth as primary criterion of growth, pragmatism, and over-emphasis on the church. However, these critiques had as much or more to do with McGavran’s American ‘translators’ as with church growth as it was originally conceived as practiced by McGavran. In the 1990s, the term ‘church growth’ lost much of its association with Donald McGavran and became associated instead with church marketing and the growth of the suburban megachurches” (Bolger, 2007, 182).

²² McGavran defines three kinds of growth: Biological (those born into Christian families), transfer (those who move from one congregation to another), and conversion as real growth (those outside the church that come to Christ by being baptized and becoming active members in the local church). McGavran also mentions other types of growth.

Internal growth: increase of subgroups within existing churches and the continually perfecting Christians. . . . Expansion growth: each congregation expands as it converts non-Christians . . . [and receives] transfer members. Extension growth: each congregation plants daughter churches among its own kind of people. . . . Bridging growth: congregations. . . find bridges to other [peoples groups]. (McGavran 1990, 72)

²³ “In my readings of McGavran’s early works, I believe he considered numerical analysis as a tool’ a ‘thermometer’ (a word McGavran himself used on several occasions), that demonstrated where there was need for reevaluation and for a change in mission strategy to bring renewed focus and health to the mission enterprise. . . . The Church Growth movement itself must revisit Donald McGavran’s missiological priorities, which recognized that numerical growth is not the goal of mission; it is a desired by-product” (Van Engen 2004, 194).

²⁴ “Every nation is made up of various layers of strata of society. In many nations earth stratum is clearly separated from each other” (McGavran 1955, 1).

²⁵ In McGavran's book *Understanding Church Growth* (1990), he argues that there are three sets of factors that affect the fact of recognizing receptive or unreceptive peoples to the gospel. The first factor is contextual. "There are political, sociological, cultural, and environmental factors over which the church or the mission has no control" (1990, 19). For instance, there are some areas of China where any worship meeting is outlawed. The second factor is institutional, which are those factors that a church or denomination can control. He emphasizes those denominations that became supporters of the social gospel, leaving aside evangelism and church planting. Third, he mentions the spiritual factor. The Holy Spirit acts in nontraditional ways and is not subject to contextual or institutional factors, and the churches must listen.

²⁶ This resistant/receptivity theory provides the soil for the pragmatic nature of the Church Growth movement: No one method for evangelizing or church planting is applicable in every peoples group. "An essential task is to discern receptivity and –when this is seen—to adjust methods, institutions, and personnel until the receptive are becoming Christians and reaching out to win their fellows to eternal life" (McGavran 1990, 192). This receptivity/ resistance depend on certain factors, which will be developed below. Thus, "peoples become Christians where a Christward movement occurs within that society" (McGavran 1955, 10).

²⁷ "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers" (McGavran 1990, 163). Strategically, most people become Christians when reached by newly Christian friends, or relatives (social networks/ webs of relationships/ bridges of God), more than by a missionary stranger.

²⁸ Biblical understanding of "discipling" is wider than McGavran's definition. "Discipling" for McGavran seems to be a change of religious allegiance, "a commitment to Christ and to the body of Christ" (1990, x). McGavran suggested disciple as a verb and setting forth three meanings. D1 (as discipleship level one) implies the idea of people becoming friendly to the idea of becoming Christian. D2 is about turning non-Christians from nonfaith to faith in Christ and incorporating them into a church. D3 "would mean teaching an existing Christian as many of the truth of the Bible as possible" (1990, 123). For McGavran "discipling" deserves more attention than "perfecting" within the theology of Church Growth. Meanwhile, what he understood as "perfecting" seems closer to what the Scriptures present as discipling (e.g., lifelong process and ethical development, conversion, "teaching to observe all things."

²⁹ The strategic approach is not "to snatch individuals out of [its own culture] into a different society" (McGavran 1955, 10). Some western Christians committed that mistake, which McGavran exemplified as the "mission station," where missionaries acquired land, built residences, schools, hospitals, and churches, presented the gospel to individuals (not considering that they may make group decisions, thus blocking the opportunity for a peoples' movement) and extracted those new converts out of their original context, minimizing the possibility of those converts to share their faith within their own social networks (i.e., bridges of God). Thus converts not only change religion

but also a tribe. Converts joined a colony of Christians, separating themselves from their cultures. “Converts came alone. Often even their wives refused to come with them. Naturally conversions were few” (McGavran 1955, 49). The main concern to McGavran was not how to get decisions or memberships but how to make disciples.

³⁰ It may also be organized around a common enemy, facing a crisis, social class, organizing small groups, activities which develop community building, building a theological stance, a program or a ministry, establishing a new place and building, around the old days, growing old together, the church secretary, the liturgy, the lifestyle of the congregation, its organizational structure, and in some cases the choir director (Schaller 1978, 24-36).

³¹ “The larger outer circle is the membership circle. Every member is within that outer circle. The smaller inner circle includes the members who feel a sense of belonging and who feel fully accepted into the fellowship of the called-out community. Most of the leaders come from persons within this fellowship circle. By contrast, many of the workers who do not have policy-making authority, may be drawn from among the members who are outside the fellowship circle” (Schaller 1988, 69-70).

³² “[A]dult new members who do not become part of a group, accept a leadership role, or become involved in a task during their first year tend to become inactive” (Schaller 1988, 77). Let’s clarify that this refers to a commitment to a church, which is not always synonymous with a commitment to Christ.

³³ Those who were active regular attendees became passive after facing frustration and futility, or may become occasional through a conflicting interests. “Occasionals become lapsed through boredom, personality conflicts, or burnout, and the children of the lapsed become nominal when their parents no longer attend and give the impression that churchgoing is something which you grow out of at adolescence” (Gibbs 1994, 33).

³⁴ Inclusion: embody, embrace, encompass, incorporate, and involve.

³⁵ “The fear zone is the world ‘out there’ that presents threats to our safety and stability as an organization” (Law 2000, 19).

³⁶ “Most organizations consider the space within their boundaries as a safe zone in which, as the label connotes, the members feel safe and secure. . . . [Thus] only those who do not present a threat to the organization can enter” (Law 2000, 18).

³⁷ The Kingdom message shows that the Bible is not a collection of random stories, but there is unity. That is, the Bible is a tapestry of many threads, and some become central to explain who and where are we, and what is wrong, and its solution. For instance, today's Christians can identify with Old Testament, and New Testament stories.

³⁸ The main thrusts of Jesus' kingdom-message, according to N.T. Wright, are under three headings: "the end of exile, the call of renewed people, and the warning of disaster and vindication to come" (1999, 39). Jesus' parables are rooted in Jewish Scriptures, first on prophetic language to return from exile. Second, Jesus' parables were looking for actors, the hearers were called to audition for parts in the kingdom: there were to repent and believe becoming kingdom-people themselves. Jesus was "telling his hearers to give up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom-agenda" (, 44). Third, Jesus came to present what his contemporaries were longing for but with a radical twist. Jesus himself and his followers were now the true reconstituted Israel. "God's judgment would fall not on the surrounding nations but on the Israel that had failed to be the light of the world" (, 49).

³⁹ "*Philoxenia*, combines the general word for love or affection for people who are connected with kinship or faith (*phileo*), and the word for stranger (*xenos*)" (Pohl 1999, 31).

⁴⁰ "Strangers, in the strict sense, are those who are disconnected from basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community, church, work, and polity. This condition is most clearly seen in the state of homeless people and refugees. Other experience detachment and exclusion to lesser degrees" (Pohl 1999:13).

⁴¹ The term *oikos*, as one's sphere of influence in one's social system, is "composed of those related to each other through ties of kinship, tasks, and territory" (Arn and Arn 1998, 40). In other words it included the whole extended family, both genders, all ages and different generations, sojourners, free and slaves, who shared one space in common, a court or a roof over their heads. Today this concept, according to Arn and Arn, can apply to those webs of common kinship, friendship, associates (common interests or recreational pursuits) (1998, 45). The *oikos* of each individual becomes an important starting point for an evangelistic strategy. Why? Because within the *oikos* people are receptive, it is a natural network for the individual to share him or herself. As well, an *oikos* can allow a web of support for new Christians to be assimilated, and affect other *oikos*.

⁴² In their writings in Spanish, some Latin American missiologists are now using the term "North Atlantic" to refer to streams of thought from the United States and Europe. They prefer this term to the term "Western" because many in Latin America consider themselves to also be "Western," both from an ideological and geographical perspective. Therefore, the term "Western" is too imprecise, and the term "North Atlantic" may be a little more precise, focusing entirely on a geographical description.

⁴³ On the other hand, hospitality is more than entertaining outsiders, or making them come back to church. Hospitality is about welcoming guests, those pilgrims looking for grace and a safe place to land. Hospitality is about developing a space where our God's obsession for fellowship may create an environment of grace in the midst of fellowship. In other words, our triune God wants to restore and provide shalom in Christ to welcome those guests into Christ's people whose Spirit has been calling for so long.

⁴⁴ On the one hand, assimilation is more something like a "we" feeling, or a sense of belonging, than something that one knows. Thus, via hospitality and intentional inclusion is how assimilation should take place. Assimilation involves welcoming people to God's kingdom through the church, but it goes beyond just becoming a church member, but a Kingdom servant.

⁴⁵ Guests should not be viewed as
 functionary resources to get church work done the emergence of Kingdom growth as a paradigm of renewal spell the end of an era of church members playing support roles The typical church strategy for recruiting and deploying ministry is missionally counterproductive We ask people to leave their place of greatest connection and influence (their homes, their businesses, their schools, their communities and community organizations) to come to the church to do some church work They wonder why God can't use them where he has already embedded them—in their homes, workplaces, schools, and communities. (McNeal 2003, 45, 46, 47, 48)

⁴⁶ For Van Engen *Yearning for Numerical Growth* is an attitude on the part of the Church concerning herself, her place in the mission of God and her role in the world.

⁴⁷ Joel Green explains this dualism found in the modern era by saying, "late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century optimism gave rise in the United States to a narrative defining the human race, and the world with it, as traversing an inevitable, unrelenting path of progress, this is not a particularly biblical appraisal of things" (2003, 12).

⁴⁸ "Reviewing, then, the teaching of the New Testament, one would have to say that, on the one hand, there is joy *in the rapid growth of the church in its earliest days*, but that on the other, there is no evidence that the numerical growth of the church is a matter of primary concern. There is no shred of evidence in Paul's letters to suggest that he judged the churches by the measure of their success in rapid numerical growth, nor is there anything comparable to the strident cries of some contemporary evangelists that the salvation of the world depends upon the multiplication of believers" (Newbigin 1995, 140-141).

⁴⁹ In McGavran's thinking, "church growth follows where Christians show faithfulness in finding the lost. It is not enough to search for lost sheep. . . . The purpose is not to search, but to find. . . . Therefore, faithfulness to God implies doing our part, empowered by the Holy Spirit as responsible members of his church" (1990, 6, 9). Growing churches please God. It is God's will. Thus, numerical growth (counting disciples) is the main priority. Church Growth is not about making decisions, but about making disciples.

⁵⁰ In Latin America there is a conceptual difference between the evangelical and Protestant movement. Protestant usually refers to historical churches born before 1850 in the United States and Europe. On the other hand, we have the evangelical church which refers to the missionary movement from the United States.

⁵¹ The relation between these two main branches of Christianity, even up to present day, is not peaceful. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church describes evangelical churches as *sectas* (sects), which in Spanish carries a connotation of what in English would be *cults* (SEDAC, 1995, 3). At the same time, Evangelicals refer to the Roman Catholic Church with all kinds of negative adjectives, describing it as a false expression of Christianity.

⁵² Latin American missions were excluded from the Edinburg Missionary Conference in 1910. Comparing Africa and regions of Asia and Oceania, Latin America was considered a Christian region, because of the control of the Roman Catholic Church (Miguez Bonino 1997, 85). I have to agree with Miguez Bonino that this project of the historical churches, from a missiological perspective, was a failure.

⁵³ “Largely as a response to technological, political, social, and religious changes during the twentieth-century.... Medicine, translation work, radio, and aviation have attracted thousands of missionary specialists in recent decades, and other areas such as education, literature, and agriculture work have also grown at a steady pace” (Tucker 1983, 325).

⁵⁴ Therefore, the antagonism between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals grew to the point of violent crowds threatening the life of evangelists. As Neill notes,

the entry of North American missionaries during the twentieth century could produce violence: they were often revivalist, and their methods were undiplomatic, and sometimes they did not mince their words about Catholicism.... They [Protestants] were eyed as though they were almost as bad as communists. (Neill and Chadwick 1986, 470)

In 1941 the Archbishop of Costa Rica evaluated the Protestant work in the Caribbean area of the country (where for over 50 years 91% of the immigrant black population in Costa Rica live and were not allowed to immigrate elsewhere) saying: the importation of [Caribbean black] laborers, Protestants in great part, for work on the Atlantic Railroad, brought with it a very serious problem concerning which even up to the present, to all appearances, we have not wished to realize. A large extension of national territory was thus separated spiritually from the other sections of the country. (Nelson 1963, 69)

⁵⁵ These characteristics were crucial in explaining Christian conversion during the twentieth, and present century in the large majority of Latin American churches. In a few words, the new convert is alone, free, and responsible before the Savior for his or her salvation with minimum social implications whatsoever. No wonder psychological perspectives have dominated conversion studies among evangelical circles.

⁵⁶ Miguez Bonino describes fundamentalism as “Christ is ontologically above Scripture, but epistemologically Christ is subordinated to Scripture” (1997, 37).

⁵⁷ The Pentecostal movement is theologically characterized by its substitutionary atonement theology, the importance of a dramatic conversion, as well as the baptism of the Spirit with the “gift of tongues” (angelic tongues) as a second experience of sanctification, including other spiritual manifestations depending on the current dispensational trend (laughter, dance, shaking, visions, among others), divine healings, and a premillenaristic-apocalyptic eschatology (Miguez Bonino 1997, 61-62). It appears that the Pentecostal movement came to strengthen evangelical theology, which had already taken root in Latin America.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, the two years in which it received “significant military aid were 1984 and 1985, at the height of the civil war in Nicaragua.... U.S. aid to tiny El Salvador [with a population of approximately 5 million people] amounted to an amazing \$4.2 billion” (Coerver and Hall 1999, 152-154).

⁵⁹ According to Miguez Bonino, this evangelical influence in Latin America has produced several negative effects. First, it has led to a blind acceptance and support of “the worst features of United States ideology and politics” which have legitimated repressive policies, economic exploitation (globalization), and the legitimization of geopolitical and economic crusades around the world, as well as anti-democratic regimes. Second, in the field of ethics “legalism and self-justification” and dualism have been expressed in the separation of the spiritual and material realms, and the withdrawal from the evil world. This second characteristic explains the lack of a prophetic commitment to denounce the evils of society, and an overemphasis on microethical legalism for new converts. Thirdly, Miguez Bonino mentions the ecclesiastical life of the evangelical churches in Latin America as being characterized by a “doctrine of separation” which has led to division and isolation among churches. Fourthly, Miguez Bonino mentions as the worst influence of the evangelical movement as the doctrinal distortion of fundamentalism, expressed when the “stereotypical theological scheme, badly named ‘the plan of salvation,’ as if it were a computer where certain keys should be pressed to obtain the desired results” (1997, 47). Bibliolatry is another aspect of this distortion, portrayed by “an arbitrary and rationalistic hermeneutic... [where] the study of the Bible becomes an exercise of permanent repetition” (1997, 47). Premillennialism is another feature that “empties the community of faith of all theological meaning, transforming the church into a kind of ‘waiting room’ for the millennium, without any soteriological significance.... [and transforming] human history into a series of numbers and signs” (1997, 47). The

parousia becomes a guessing game of dates or years, rather than a joyful and faithful embracement of Christ's invitation to carry Jesus' cross for all disciples (1997, 47).

⁶⁰ An interesting historical event of mission in Latin America was the first COMIBAM meeting in 1987 in Sao Paulo, Brazil. This was the first non-Western missionary meeting in the last three centuries. This meeting was a worldwide announcement of a new era in the mission movement around the world. Even though, "the first COMIBAM was strongly influenced by 'managerial missiology' from the United States", the second COMIBAM (Acapulco 1998) began the process of dialoging with the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL), a promising step for a "critical reflection in good biblical fashion" (Escobar 2002, 159).

⁶¹ According to Gomez a lack of quality and relevance in teaching, preaching, discipleship, and pastoral care are among the main causes of this desertion (1996, 135-137). There is something in the organizational culture of the evangelical church in Costa Rica. For instance, one of three pastors mentioned not investing much of their time in training for discipleship (1996, 117). While twenty three percent of the evangelical interviewees admitted they hardly evangelize. And this fact was given mainly among new converts (1996, 113).

⁶² The churches are facing certain demographic issues, which may affect their mission in Costa Rica. First is the demographic of aging. One of every five heads of households in Costa Rica is over 60 years old, and of these 27.5% are women and 10.9% are men who live alone. This may be related to the growth in the divorce rate. Divorce in Costa Rica doubled in a little more than a decade from 9.9% in 1980 to 21.2% in 1996. The problem of divorce also affected the traditional perspective on gender roles. In 1997 41.9% of male head of households and 55% of female head of households were separated or divorced (Proyecto Estado de la Nación 1997, 43-44).

⁶³ www.simer.biz

⁶⁴ Something to consider is that outside the metropolitan area people tend to be more Roman Catholic than Evangelical.

⁶⁵ Among those in the survey who profess some affiliation, levels of participation vary. For example, women tend to engage more than men do. Six of ten Roman Catholics participate in some church-related activity at least once a week, while nine of ten evangelicals attend church at least once a week. In both the Roman Catholic and evangelical churches, participation is lowest within the age category of 15-20. It is slightly higher among those between the ages of 21-30, but still lower within that age range than it is among those over the age of 30. Costa Ricans tend to become more religious after the age of 41. That is, young Costa Ricans tend to be less religious and more disinterested, especially within the ages of 15-20. During these difficult teenage years, Costa Ricans face the challenges of being exposed to humanism in college and/or the goal of becoming financially independent. The younger the population the less they tend to participate in the church, and they may even drop their religious affiliation.

⁶⁶<http://www.ucr.ac.cr/documentos/Encuesta%20de%20Opini%C3%B3n%20P%C3%BAblica%20Rector-conferencia%20prensa%202005.pdf>

⁶⁷ There were 58,7 active Roman Catholics in 1991, and by 2007, however, there were only 44,9. On the category of non participant Roman Catholics in 1991, they were 22,7 and by 2007 were 25,6.

⁶⁸ <http://www.nacion.com/proa/2008/febrero/24/proa1430689.html>

⁶⁹ What tentative conclusions might one draw from these three studies? First, young people in Costa Rica are among the most difficult to evangelize and are the most likely to leave the church. Second, the church does not seem to be effective in evangelizing and discipling young people even within the church (i.e. those who grew up in families who attended church), nor those outside of the church. Third, young Costa Ricans may be increasingly finding organized institutional religion irrelevant. In general, irrespective of age, those with no religious affiliation are growing faster than evangelicals, and Roman Catholics are declining. Is the church declining in Costa Rica?

⁷⁰ According to Miguez Bonino one of the faces of Latin America is the ethnic face. By this he means those Protestants who have immigrated from Asia (like the Korean-Presbyterian Diaspora in Latin America) and Africa, or those specific ethnic groups who have adopted or innovated new expressions of Pentecostalism that are culturally relevant. An example of this in Costa Rica is Pentecostal and syncretistic mission churches from Brasil, and Puerto Rico (e.g. Mita Mission).

⁷¹ In the last 15 years or so in Costa Rica, there has been a change in the use of language among Roman Catholics and evangelicals. They both refer to evangelicals (Protestants) of all kinds as “Christians” and Roman Catholics as “Catholics.”

⁷² The 2005 report of Jehovah’s Witnesses Worldwide
http://www.watchtower.org/statistics/worldwide_report.htm

⁷³ Handout “Nuestro Ministerio del Reino” (Our Ministry of the Kingdom) February 2006 Vol. 7, Num. 2. This is a publication for Central American countries only.

⁷⁴ For instance, they invented a *new* Greek tense in order to translate John 8 as “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was, I was,” thus denying that Jesus is the same as Jehovah.

⁷⁵ This brief explanation of *La Visión* of Carlos “Cash” Luna can be compared with the “Model of Jesus” by Cesar Castellanos, Colombian pastor. Both claim receiving a model of Church Growth as a vision from God. Castellanos explains his model in the book The Ladder of Success. London: Dovewell Publications, 2001.

⁷⁶ Mathias Zahniser (1997, 92) explains the structure of a rite of passage (adapted from Victor Turner’s model, and the work of Arnold Van Gennep). The structure of a rite of

passage includes three phases. The first phase, separation, “involves the orchestration of symbols in activities removing initiates from their state in society (‘old status’). . . . The second phase is called liminality, from the Latin word meaning ‘threshold,’ because it is transitional. . . . This liminal phase provides initiates with a chaotic limbo condition of transition ‘betwixt and between” (Zahniser 1997, 92). During this liminal phase, transformation occurs. It is “a chaotic time precisely because it abolishes all socially sanctioned identities, statuses, and roles. . . . This antistructure suspends all former guidelines for behavior and identity and renders initiates ‘structurally invisible,’ certain positive characteristics prevail” (Zahniser 1997, 92-93) . Also there is a sense of *communitas*, a sense of common humanity emerges from a sense of community because roles and status are suspended. Finally, reintegration, ritually reincorporates initiates into society as full-fledged adults through another set of ceremonies. “Without separation, transition and reintegration, no social transformation can take place” (Zahniser 1997, 95).

⁷⁷ According to Schaller there are barriers that work as dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. He describes every congregation as having two concentric circles that work as barriers.

The larger outer circle is the membership circle. Every member is within that outer circle. The smaller inner circle includes the members who feel a sense of belonging and who feel fully accepted into the fellowship of the called-out community. Most of the leaders come from persons within this fellowship circle. By contrast, many of the workers who do not have policy-making authority, may be drawn from among the members who are outside the fellowship circle. (1988, 69-70)

Those within the inner circle tend to refer to themselves as “we,” while those in the outer circle tend to refer to the church as “they.” Senior pastors usually are located in the middle of the inner circle, and associate pastors tend to locate themselves in the outer circle. Those within the inner circle do not tend to see any problem with being a barrier for others. Something to learn from Schaller’s theory of circles is that a “congregation which seeks to grow should look at how friendship ties can be increased between individual members and those persons who are not active members of any worshipping congregation” (1988, 75).

⁷⁸ Newcomers “will not be ‘in’ until others in the clan have had a chance to get used to [them]. . . . Newcomers will probably not feel part of the group until the matriarch or patriarch of the congregation has communicated to the newcomer and the rest of the congregation that this new person is on the inside” (Oswald and Leas, 1997, 32).

⁷⁹ “For those interested in Church Growth the obvious conclusion is the larger the size of the congregation, the more likely the quality and depth of meaning of the worship experience will be the primary reason why first-time visitors return. The smaller the congregation, the more likely the inclusionary or exclusionary character of the fellowship will be the number-one factor in determining whether first-time visitors return” (Schaller 1987, 22).

⁸⁰ These categories were developed in conversation with the dissertation committee for this thesis.

⁸¹ See Clarke, Peter B. 2006. *New Religions in Global Perspective*. Routledge: NY. Clarke discusses neopentecostal churches as new religious movements (NRM's).

⁸² Putting aside those conflicting theological and moral issues that make *La Visión* appear like a brain washing cult, that is the place where new and old members find care. That is the brightness of small group's ministry! VA church, for instance, had small groups for two months, time where the researcher was informed about them finding new friends and growing spiritually. Even today, this church has not gone back to starting small groups. From a different perspective those who have served in this church have not found care, mentoring, or even a thank you note after years of volunteer serve. Serving at this church is like going into the jungle alone and poorly trained. Megachurches seem to be soil for any hard working leader to be burned out.

⁸³ Barge and Schlueter in "Memorable Messages and Newcomer Socialization" assume that "newcomers are the most attentive to others' messages during their early weeks as newcomers. . . . [The focus is on] discourse [as] the analytical starting point, which moves us to explore how newcomers are constituted by the discursive formations in which they participate and engage" (2004, 1).

⁸⁴ Coral Ridge Ministries in Florida, James D. Kennedy.

⁸⁵ According to Rogers, "Mass media channels are relatively more important at the knowledge stage [of the innovation-decision process of adopting or rejecting the innovation of a new idea], and interpersonal channels are relatively more important at the persuasion stage in the innovation-decision process" (1995, 202-203). That is, mass media channels may inform about the existence and location of a church, but they do not help in persuading a person to come to visit a church. Nothing replaces the impact that interpersonal relationships have to persuade people to visit a congregation and to meet Christ.

⁸⁶ "Church shoppers in general . . . often look first at quality in terms of the parking, the women's restrooms, the nursery, the meeting rooms, the music, the sermon, the teaching, the worship, the ministries with children and youth, the welcome accorded the first-time visitor, and the place of missions and outreach in the local list of priorities" (Schaller 1994, 21).

⁸⁷ The term "unchurched" is common in some church growth literature. George Hunter III (1996) describes unchurched people as those who have never been affected by Christianity, neither by Christ nor His church, and therefore have never been in church before. Hunter uses other synonyms for the term unchurched, such as "secular people," "pre-Christians," and "pagans."

⁸⁸ It may also be organized around a common enemy, facing a crisis, social class, organizing small groups, activities which develop community building, building a theological stance, a program or a ministry, establishing a new place and building, around the old days, growing old together, the church secretary, the liturgy, the lifestyle of the congregation, its organizational structure, and in some cases the choir director.

⁸⁹ “The first-time visitor will generally have come out of some sense of personal need. . . . The return visitor, by contrast, has come because of the welcome he or she received on the first visit. . . . Only if the first visit has been positive experience is a second visit likely. It is the warmth and friendliness of the congregation which are the most important factors in making the first visit a positive experience” (Bast 1988, 90).

⁹⁰ John Savage (1976), in his book *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member*, discovered that church people with these characteristics were once very committed church members. One critical incident, however, once took place at church and the feelings of the person were hurt, or something shameful in the life of a person happened and pushed the person not to come back to church. In any case, the person stayed away from church several Sundays, and no one came to visit, or made even a phone call. The shameful or painful experience becomes hurt and anger. This can motivate people to stay away from church even longer, to the point that the habit of not going to church on Sunday becomes real. Usually, drop-outs give the congregation, consciously or unconsciously, six to eight weeks, to call on them. After these weeks, an inactive, and a becoming nominal member, is born. In other words, the longer we wait after a member has become inactive, the more difficult it is to help him or her to become active again. According to the author, it is more difficult to reactivate a bored or apathetic member than it is to gain new members. Pastoral care is extremely important in any situation to avoid having bored and apathetic members becoming nominal Christians. Another cause for church inactivity that ends up in nominalism is unresolved personal conflicts. Savage, mentioned above, states that anxiety is a major cause. Anxiety is produced by an interpersonal conflict at church. When that anxiety is not resolved, it turns into anger. Many of these folks found that no one from church provided any follow up, and then, once hurt they decided to drop out, or they decided to reduce their anxiety by not attending church any more.

⁹¹ Other causes that motivated desertion in Costa Rica, according to Gomez, are in the following order: (1) new Christians dropping out because they feel unable to maintain good conduct according to moral standards at church (burn out); (2) the lack of discipleship and lack of care; (3) the unexemplary testimony of other Christians, and the pastor (burn out); (4) religious impositions upon new believers (burn out), (5) wrong administration of finances (hurt); (6) and irrelevant or repetitive sermons (1996, 122). From this list, the researcher may reinterpret that those Costa Ricans who deserted their local churches over a decade ago, left hurt and burned out.

⁹² Back in 1996, a Costa Rican researcher Jorge Gomez, after analyzing a series of surveys on church research, concluded that “approximately one of every two people who were evangelical at some period of their lives, have abandoned the church” (, 133). That is, half of the evangelicals at that time had experience leaving their church for a while

and looked for another church. According to him 1/5 evangelicals and 1/3 Roman Catholics can be considered nominal members of those churches (1996, 33). As we can see, Costa Rica may have been experiencing nominalism for over a decade.

⁹³ There is a cultural phenomenon to consider with Costa Ricans that may skew any research done in this context. They always express themselves as being happy and full of life, when asked. For instance, in 2009 Costa Rica was evaluated as the greenest and happiest country in the world, according to a new list that ranks nations by combining measures of their ecological footprint with the happiness of their citizens. We Costa Ricans know that that is not completely true. Culturally, however, we tend to always see the positive side. In other words, even if Costa Ricans do not feel welcomed and accepted at a particular church, when formally asked about their opinion, the opinion is likely to always be positive. See these websites for more information:

<http://www.happyplanetindex.org>
<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/07/05/costa.rica.happy.nation/>.

⁹⁴ Oswald and Leas mention that each church needs a clear identity, a congregational harmony and cooperation, a pastor who generates enthusiasm, a warm and inviting welcome, and a place to land (1997, 87).

⁹⁵ “When laypersons make fifteen-minute visits to the homes of first-time worship visitors within thirty-six hours, 85 percent of them return the following week. Make this home visit within seventy-two hours, and 60 percent of them return. Make it seven days later, and 15 percent will return. The pastor making this call, rather than laypersons, cut each result in half” (Miller 1990, 72, 73). Now this quotation indicates something that works in the U.S.A., but would it work in Costa Rica? Research has to be done in Costa Rica in this area to test this aspect, and this dissertation would like to encourage more studies in this area.

⁹⁶ “[A]dult new members who do not become part of a group, accept a leadership role, or become involved in a task during their first year tend to become inactive” (Schaller 1988, 77). Let’s clarify that this refers to a commitment to a church, which is not always synonymous with a commitment to Christ.

⁹⁷ “We can attract ten new members to our church with about the same amount of energy it takes to get one inactive person to come back. New member recruitment and inactive member work are two different subjects. Both are important, but neither can substitute for the other. Both should be worked at, but in very different ways” (Miller 1987, 28).

⁹⁸ There are five goals for a home visit, according to Bast: “(1) to get acquainted, (2) to answer any questions they have about your church, (3) to learn about their religious background and needs, (4) to leave them a brochure describing your church, and (5) to invite them back” (1988, 118). In our case, however, the evangelical leaders seem to be too busy with their programs to develop programs for attending peoples’ needs.

¹⁰⁰ McGavran’s missional strategy was based on his observation of social interaction.

¹⁰¹ “Many social factors bind humans together—income, education, occupation, race, religion, politics, lifestyle, family, ethnic background, and national heritage. We migrate toward similar people and feel most comfortable with those We find security and support among like-minded friends. . . . These familiar habits eliminate worries about dealing with weird people from distance squares. Human clustering within social squares orders life and makes it predictable” (Kraybill 2003, 194, 195).

¹⁰² “[Jesus] model[ed] ways of penetrating boxes. He cross[ed] lines. He walk[ed] over borders Wandering across the checkerboard of his time. . . . Jesus ignor[ed] the social norms that spell out the who, when, and where of social interaction. . . . In other words, Jesus ignored social boxes. He ignored the cultural labels and invaded the social boxes” (Kraybill 2003, 196).

¹⁰³ “By evangelism, I mean proclaiming Jesus Christ as God and Savior and persuading men to become his disciples and responsible members of his church” (McGavran 1960, 66).

¹⁰⁴ McGavran recognized that mission is not a human initiated endeavor, but *Missio Dei* (1970, 31). God is the one Who finds (not a seeking God), and His church must have the same passion to find the lost (harvest theology). Thus God’s will is for God’s church to grow. That is for McGavran the true church, a church that grows in quantity and quality, and that growth can be measured.

¹⁰⁵ For McGavran “the Bible is the Word of God inspired, authoritative, and utterly reliable” (Pinola 1995, 93). His way of using and interpreting the Scripture, however, was precarious (Pinola 1995, 91).

¹⁰⁶ In McGavran’s book *Understanding Church Growth*, the author states that growth has been taking place but it has not been documented because a “fog” that does not allow growth to be seen. This fog is created by leaders who are acutely conscious of Church Growth, while others keep an inaccurate membership accounting of Christians, or believe that such a task is just “numberitis,” others do not invest (budget) on Church Growth strategies, other emphasize on individual conversion and against group conversion, others have a semantic problem meaning by “church,” “evangelism,” and “witness” something totally different. “The fog keeps the sending churches in the dark. They are ‘supporting missions’ but are kept from having any ideas as the growth of the church Fog also prevents intelligent action toward discipling the nations” (1990, 65). McGavran also mentions the concepts of “the effect of redemption” and “the socioeconomic lift” to illustrate other ways how the growth of the church can be halted. These two concepts have to do with those benefits that Christians obtain by belonging to the body of Christ such as climbing the socioeconomic ladder, and receiving aid from abroad. These result in Christians developing ghettos, and their web of relationships changes.

¹⁰⁷ Haugk states that usually it is those with no particular leadership roles at church who exhibit a great concern for inactive members. This shows that at times church leaders

may show some fear of reaching out to inactive members, and they may not be the right people for this kind of ministry (1989, 25).

¹⁰⁸ Schaller suggests a series of assumptions on how to handle inactive members. The key is to avoid scapegoating inactive members and developing our own assumptions to explain why they are inactive. Schaller's 15 assumptions (1988, 117-121) can be summarized as follows: Every person who joins a congregation did so with complete sincerity and in good faith. Those who are inactive have a good reason for being so, and instead of speculating about it, that reason has to be identified by asking about it. This is a good exercise for the church in order to challenge "our assumptions." Now, like any other human being instead of offering reasons, inactive people may offer excuses (people talk with their feet). If the church practices active listening to them, more than once and for several hours, it will discover that behind those excuses are humans who want to be listened to. The longer the church waits after a person has become inactive, the more difficult it will become to help him become an active member again (e.g., the deadline is usually eight weeks). Thus, the most appropriate time to engage an inactive member is as soon as possible.

¹⁰⁹ "Attendees who have not moved into the realm of ownership will inevitably refer to the church as 'your church' when talking to you or other attendees. In telling their friends about the church, they may call it 'that church.' Once they begin to sense ownership, however, their language changes. 'Your church' becomes 'our church' and conversations with others make mention of 'my church.' These linguistic subtleties are a good gauge of where people are in the assimilation continuum. An acknowledgement of ownership will always precede any interest in membership, so it is vital for you to help your attendees make the mental shift. And what breeds that sense of ownership? Responsibility" (Searcy 2007, 136).

¹¹⁰ "The glue helps to explain why some members may move their place of residence five or ten or twenty miles and continue to drive back to the old church. The glue helps to explain why some families continue in the same congregation for three or four generations despite a scattering of the individuals. The glue helps to explain why some congregations attract certain 'church shoppers' who visit other congregations and keep on shopping until they find this church. The glue helps to explain the continued loyalty of certain members who display considerable discontent with certain phases of the church program or are unhappy with a particular staff member. . . . The other side of that picture is that the glue can become gummy and begin to cause some people to feel excluded. Perhaps the clearest examples of this can be . . . the blue-collar worker who comes to an upper-class church which places a premium on excellence in verbal skills; . . . or the liberal who walks in on a theological conservative church;" (Schaller 1980, 36).

¹¹¹ In Costa Rica, when attending a special social gathering, especially at certain rites of passage, it is common to receive a homemade souvenir, such as a bookmark or "knick-knack" to keep in your home to commemorate the event. Therefore, giving visitors a

small gift, such as a bookmark or refrigerator magnet, would be a culturally appropriate strategy for emphasizing the importance of their visit and making them feel appreciated.

¹¹² See N.T. Wright, 1999

¹¹³ See Padilla, 1985, 1991, 1992

¹¹⁴ See Green, 1989, 2003

¹¹⁵ *Missio Dei*

¹¹⁶ See Green, 1989, 2003

¹¹⁷ See Padilla, 1985, 1991, 1992 ; Snyder, 1985

¹¹⁸ See Van Engen, 1981

¹¹⁹ See Costas, 1992

¹²⁰ See Frost and Hirsh, 2003

¹²¹ See Savage, 1992

¹²² See Gibbs, 1994

¹²³ See Gibbs, 1994

¹²⁴ See Haugk, 1989

¹²⁵ See Arn, 1998

¹²⁶ See Braden, 1987; Savage, 1992

¹²⁷ See Braden, 1987

¹²⁸ See Searcy, 2007

¹²⁹ See Matson, 1996 ; N.T. Wright, 1999; Green, 1989, 2003.

¹³⁰ See Law, 2000

¹³¹ See McIntosh, 2006

¹³² See McIntosh, 1999

¹³³ See Heck, 1988

¹³⁴ See Oswald and Leas, 1987

¹³⁵ See Hunter, 1987

¹³⁶ See Rainer, 1999

¹³⁷ See Schaller, 1993

¹³⁸ See Hunter, 1987

¹³⁹ See Schaller, 1978

¹⁴⁰ See McGavran, 1955

¹⁴¹ See Gibbs, 1994; Savage, 1992

¹⁴² See Hunter, 1987

¹⁴³ The phrase “no theology” by Padilla (1972) seems to refer to theologizing without social implications for the reality in Latin America.

¹⁴⁴ Other systems may exist (besides the assimilation system), such as an evangelism system, a discipleship system, a worship and preaching system, etc.

APPENDICES

Contact sheet

Interview questions to leaders, those being assimilated, and drop-outs

The Contract with the Celestial Corporation

Longitudinal phone survey

Welcome

My name is Osias Segura, I am a profesor at Seminario ESEPA, and I am working on my doctoral Project. I am researching on how people feel when visit different religious groups, and this is a group that I have included in this study. Of course, this research I am doing it in coordination with the leaders of this congregation.

The idea of the study is to contact those who visit for the first time a specific religious group, and interview them at several occasions throughout six months, to understand how they feel about the group they are visiting. Each phone interview would only take five minutes, and the information will be confidential.

I would like to ask for your permission to participate in this study. I assure you that this study has nothing to do with religious proselytism, and at any moment I will try to convince you to do something, or to sell you anything.

Would you like to participate? *Check mark, please:*

Yes () *Please, provide the following data* No () *Ends here, Thanks!!*

Provide me with the following personal data to contact you:

3. Name:_____.

4. City where you live:_____.

5. Phone number I can reach you _____.

6. Days of the week I could call to interview you:_____.

7. Hours I could call to interview you:_____.

Ushers will collect this sheet. If not, please find them and give it to them. Thanks so much for your cooperation!

In-depth Exit Interview (Month 6)

How was your life before you started coming to this group?

How many religious groups did you visit before attending this one?

Before visiting (religious group name) how was your life? How is it now?

Do you consider yourself a new person from the time you started visiting this group?

Do you believe that your life has meaning now?

How was your relationship with your family members and friends before coming to this group?

How are those relationships now?

How was your relationship with your God before coming to this group? How is it now?

How did you use to understand the world in which you live? How is it now?

Previous religious allegiance

What things originally attracted you to this group?

How is your life now?

How did you end up in (religious group name)?

What did motivate to come to (religious group name)?

Who (what) did invite you in the first place to come?

Did you consider yourself a new person since you start coming to (religious name group)?

Who do you like to become like? (model person)

How do you feel participating in this group?

Do you feel that you are growing spiritually?

What is the most important thing you can do to please God in this group?

How do you describe yourself today *participating* in this group?

What do you like the most of this group?

What do you like less of this group?

If you could change anything in this group, what would it be?

What would you maintain?

In the last 6 month how many close friends have you been able to develop?

Was there anything that almost kept you from continue attending this group?

Who or what was that help you grow in your faith? (program, activity, person)

What kind of people (gender, class, racial background) do you think this group attracts the most?

Do you come with friends of family members to this group?

Do you feel welcome in this group?

Are your children or spouse liking this group as well as you?

Are you a “member” of this group, or are you planning to become one?

What benefits are you getting from become a member?

Do you think that sharing your faith with others is important? How do you do it?

Do you see yourself as a member of this group? 0 (no) 10 (very much)

Has this group any *peculiar identity and values*? (different from other groups)

If someone would ask you to describe this group, what would you say? What makes this group different from others?

How would you describe someone mature in his/her faith in this group and his/her difference from someone of another religious group?

What are those things that are important (values) in this group? What are those things that must not be broken?

Is there any important phrase or slogan you've heard in this group?

What characterize this group from other religious groups?

Do you know the mission statement of this congregation?

What activities or activity did help you grow in your faith?

Do you remember any important teaching or sermon that impacted you deeply? Which one?

According to what you've learned in this group how is a Christian person differently from any other person? Do you believe you are already that person?

What have you learn here that didn't learn somewhere else?

What words or terms have you learned in this group?

How do you see yourself in the future in this group?

How do you see yourself 5 years from now in this group?

What is the future goal this group may have for you in the near future?

What do you see yourself doing differently in this group in a near future?

Are things in your present life that have become an obstacle to grow deeper in your faith?

What would you like to do for God in this group in the near future?

What would you like to do to grow deeper in your faith?

What would you like to do to bring others to God in this group?

What should this group do or keep doing to please God even more?

Interview questions for dropouts

1. How and when did you become a Christian?
 - i. How, why, and when did you become a member of your last church?
 - ii. Before becoming a member how many churches did you visit or were a member?
 - iii. Are you currently visiting or have become a member of another church?
 - iv. What kind of church (characteristics) are you looking for today?
2. When people leave their previous church it tends to be a painful experience, usually it happens as a product of a conflict of some sort? Would you mind sharing your experience with me?
 - i. Were you visited or received any care during the weeks after the conflict?
 - ii. How did you end up deciding leaving your church?
 - iii. What lessons did you learn from this experience?
3. Do you feel hurt by what happened? Yes!
 - i. Do you feel hurt with God, the leadership, or the church?
 - ii. Did you have close friends who may have done something to make you come back to church?
 - iii. What do you miss the most from attending this church?
 - iv. What have you done to find healing?
4. How do you evaluate the disciple, evangelistic, and the incorporation tasks of your church?
 - i. Any story you would like to share with me to illustrate your answer?
 - ii. Were you disciplined, and/ or evangelized in this church?
5. What are the reasons people may feel attracted, as well as rejected, from this congregation?
 - i. What attracts them to this church?
 - ii. What rejects them from this church?
6. Anything else you would like to add to our conversation?

Interview Questions for Leaders

Personal Background

Biographical data

How did you end up being a leader of this religious group?

Did you visit other religious groups?

How was your conversion?

Organizational issues

What is the purpose of this religious group?

How many years does this congregation have?

When and how was it founded?

How many members does this congregation have, and how many in the national level?

How is the organization of the leadership of the group?

Do you do any kind of strategic planning?

Has it changed through time the style of being and doing of this religious group?

How do you organize yourselves for evangelism and discipleship?

How do you follow up and visit people interested in this group?

If you would use a different method, which would it be?

How would you describe in a few words your main doctrinal principles?

Identity issues

What is the difference between your religious group and any other religious group around the corner?

How does anyone become a good member of your religious group (what is the process)?

How does anyone become a good leader of this religious group?

What do I need to know, value, feel, and do to be a real member of this religious group?

Which norms differentiate someone from your religious group and someone from a different religious group?

Assimilation

What is the secret of the growth of this religious group?

What do you do to be hospitable and kind to new visitors?

What do you do so the visitor may continue visiting?

What do you do so the constant visitor may become a member?

How does a new visitor or member develop new friendships?

What opportunities or activities during the week do you have to allow the participation and interaction of your people?

When and how does anyone become a member of your group?

How does the training begin?

Which words of wisdom would you provide to any new people who comes to this congregation and wants to continue attending?

What does a member have to do to be expulse from this congregation?

What kind of people do you like to visit this congregation, and what kind you do not like?

Others

How do you understand the Kingdom? Who is in and who is out?

If you would change the way of doing worship, how would it be?

If you would change anything in this congregation, what would it be?

Do you produce any type of material of your doctrine, radio, or TV program?

Heavenly Corporation A. S.

Church's logo

Heaven, Street of Gold, Cristal Beach 12, Holy Office

D-12 Project: Contract

The Heavenly Corporation A.S. expresses that it is currently facing a transcendental stage, in which, it is starting one of the biggest projects in human history, which, according to previous studies done during the evaluation phase it is contemplating a 100% success and it is prognosticating that will affect the world. The goal of this project and its strategy will be reveal during the presentation of the spear head stage.

At this moment all signing parts, in behalf of the enterprise "Heavenly Corporation A.S.", and on the other part Mr. (name of the person) that in this matter will be called servant, celebrate a common agreement in the following covenant, expressing the following:

First: This contract will have an eternal duration with no prorogates.

Second: The parts in covenant must accept all and each one of the terms and conditions that involves the project, written in the book of covenant, The Bible, which will be explained during the presentation of this project during the spearhead stage.

Third: It is indispensable to believe that the owner is capable of reaching the goal established and that he will use you as a partner in this project.

Fourth: The responsibilities of God's servant are to pray, protect, and love: your pastor, your leaders, disciples and sheep for the eternity, and will respond to Christ Jesus, president of the Heavenly Corporation A.S. for this function.

Fifth: God's servant is committed to pray, win, and take freedom to his neighborhood, province, Costa Rica, and all nations on Earth. This will be done through the evangelization of his/her friends, family members, and all people known, where will be taken away the kingdom of Darkness those souls, and will give the glory to Jesus president of the Heavenly Corporation A.S.

Sixth: God's servant is committed to be submitted, faithful, obedient, loyal, enforced, and strong with the corporation, its pastors and leaders.

Seventh: the Heavenly Corporation A.S., represented by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is promising to be with God's servant all the day of his/her life to the end of times.

If God's servant is committed to work in time and out of time and believes to fill out all requisites, must sign at the end of this document, committing to take this project to reach the goal proposed. For the Heavenly Corporation A.S. will be found the signature of its President Jesus.

Jesus Christ

(signature)

Osías Segura

Versión #4

CUEST. #

Longitudinal Phone Surveys

(25-Marzo-06)

ENTREV. #

NAME: _____ Phone: _____ Date: _____

ADDRESS: _____ Group: 1. JW 2. HC 3. EP 4. ENP

INTERVIEW WEEK 1

INTRODUCTION & FILTER

¡Good morning/ afternoon / evening! My name is _____, and I am working on a doctoral research. A few days ago you visited (*name of the group*) and you provided your information and express your desire to participate in this study.

Allow me to explain this study: The idea is to contact some people who visit for the first time any religious group, and interview them in several occasions through a period of six months, to see how they feel about the group. Each interview would not take more than 5 minutes, and the information is confidential. Let me assure you that this study has nothing to do with any type of religious propaganda; I will neither try to sell you anything nor convince you of anything.

A. Would you be willing to participate in this study?

1. Yes 2. No ☛ *thank and end* 99. Ns/Nr ☛ *thank and end*

B. At this moment, ¿Do you have any intention to continue attending (*name of the group*)?

1. Yes 2. No ☛ *thank and end* 99. Ns/Nr ☛ *thank and end*

FIRST CONTACT WITH THE GROUP

1. How did you decide to come for the first time to this group? Would you say it was because...

☛ ***Read every statement***

1. A friend invited me Other(explain): _____

2. A family member invited me 99. Ns/Nr

3. I came by my own initiative

2. Where did you hear about this group for the first time? ☛ ***Read every statement***

1. Radio, TV, I passed by and saw the sign 3. I heard comments from other people
Newspapers

4. The presence of the group in the community call my attention 99. Ns/Nr

Other(explain):

3. Have you visited any other religious group similar to this in the last year?

1. Yes

2. No ➔ *go to P5*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P5*

4. Which other religious groups have you visited in the last year?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

99. Ns/Nr

5. Which is your purpose by visiting a religious group like this? Would you say that you are looking for...? ➔ ***Read each option.***

1. Becoming a member

4. To resolve a personal situation

2. Seeing if I like here

Other(explique): _____

3. Improve my spiritual life

99. Ns/Nr

IDENTIFICATION AND LIKEABLE THINGS

6. In general terms, ¿Did you feel accepted and welcomed in this group?

1. Yes

2. No

99. Ns/Nr

7. From the aspects I am going to mention, What would you say you like the most about participating in this group during your visit ...? ➔ ***Read each option. Check only one answer.***

1. The music

6. The building

2. The message

7. The leaders of the group

3. The people who attend

8. The variety of programs

4. The environment of the group

9. All the different activities they have

5. The parking lot

Other(explique): _____

8. Evaluating in general terms your experience visiting this religious group, you would say that...? ➔ ***Read each option. Check only one answer.***

1. I dislike it very much

2. I dislike it moderately

3. I neither like it nor dislike it

4. I like it moderately

5. I like it very much

9. Would you come back again next week?

1. Yes

2. No

99. Ns/Nr

10. ¿Why? _____

OTHER ASPECTS

11. To end this interview, I am going to mention some personal situations, and tell me if you have gone through any any of them **in the last two years...** ➔ ***Read each option. Check as many as apply***

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. got married | <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Went through divorce |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Had a child | <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Have suffer any accident or serious illness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Lost a child | <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Change home address |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. A near family member died | <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Have been unemployed or change jobs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Have you gone through a significant change in you religious beliefs | <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Other [explain]:_____ |

END

These were all my questions at this time... as I mentioned in the beginning, this study include several interviews. If you allow me I will phone you again next week, to understand how you feel with regard to your upcoming visits to (name of the religious group). **¡Thanks so much for your time!**

INTERVIEW WEEK 2

INTRODUCTION

Good morning / afternoon / evening! My name is _____. I am the person who called you a couple of weeks ago and interviewed you about to visit to (name of the group).

As I explained before, I would like to interview you again in a few minutes... Is this a good moment to chat? ➔ *If not at what time can I call you back?*

ATTENDANCE

12. After your first visit, have you visited again (*name of the group*)?

1. Yes ➔ *go to P15* 2. No

13. ¿Would you visit again (*name of the group*)?

1. Yes ➔ **End interview and say you will call again in a couple of weeks** 2. No ➔ *thank and end. Explain that here the research ends.*

14. ¿Are you considering visiting regularly (*name of the group*)?

1. Yes ➔ *go to P17* 2. No

15. ¿Why? ➔ *At this moment thank and end the interview. Explain that here ends the research*

- _____

16. Since last time we talked, Have you visited at least once any other religious group?

1. Yes 2. No

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

17. In the group you are visiting, Have they invited you to participate in any special activity, besides the main meeting on the weekend?

1. Yes 2. No ➔ *go to P21*

18. In what type of activity they invited you to participate? ➔ *Classify the answer according to the following options (check as many options allows it)*

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 1. Individual meetings (2-3 people) | 3. Medium size group (11-40 people) |
| 2. Small group meetings (4-10 people) | 4. Masive meetings (41 and more people) |

19. Have you participated in any of those special activities which you were invited?

1. Yes 2. No

OTHER ASPECTS

31. Have you observe in this group anything that is not likeable to you?

1. Si

2. No ➔ *Go to P34*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P34*

32. What have you observed that is not likeable to you?

- _____

33. Have you taken time to read, see, or hear materials, or programs which are related to the religious' group you have been visited?

1. Yes

2. No ➔ *Go to the end*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to the end*

34. Could you provide me with any example?

- _____

END

These were all my questions at this time... as I mentioned in the beginning, this study include several interviews. If you allow me I will phone you again in a couple of months, to understand how you feel with regard to your upcoming visits to (name of the religious group). **¡Thanks so much for your time!**

INTERVIEWS MONTH 1-5

INTRODUCTION

Good morning / afternoon / evening! My name is _____. I am the person who called you a couple of weeks ago and interviewed you about to visit to (name of the group).

As I explained before, I would like to interview you again in a few minutes... Is this a good moment to chat? ➔ *If not at what time can I call you back?*

ATTENDANCE

35. After we talked a couple of weeks ago, Have you visited again (*name of the group*)?

1. Yes ➔ *go to P15* 2. No

36. ¿Would you visit again (*name of the group*)?

1. Yes ➔ **End interview and say you will call again in a couple of weeks** 2. No ➔ *thank and end. Explain that here the research ends.*

37. Since last time we talked, Have you visited at least once any other religious group?

1. Yes 2. No

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

38. In the group you are visiting, Have they invited you to participate in any special activity, besides the main meeting on the weekend?

1. Yes 2. No ➔ *go to P21*

39. In what type of activity they invited you to participate? ➔ *Classify the answer according to the following options (check as many options allows it)*

1. Individual meetings (2-3 people) 3. Medium size group (11-40 people)
2. Small group meetings (4-10 people) 4. Masive meetings (41 and more people)

40. Have you participated in any of those special activities which you were invited?

1. Yes 2. No

41. What theme or teaching topic do you remember from such activities?

- _____

- _____

99. Ns/Nr

HOSPITALITY

42. In general terms, Do you feel accepted and welcomed in this religious group?
 1. Yes 2. No 99. Ns/Nr
43. Have you invited anyone else to come with you and visit this religious group?
 1. Yes 2. No ➔ *Go to P26*
44. Who have you invited? ➔ *Describe the relationship of the guest with the informant*
 1. Close family members 2. Friends 3. co-workers 4. Others
45. Belong to this group your close friends or family members?
 1. Yes 2. No ➔ *Go to P49* 99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P49*
46. Who? ➔ *Check as many as mentioned*
 1. Close friends 2. Family members 3. Others
47. Would you say that you have been able to develop new friends in this group since your last visit?
 1. Yes 2. No ➔ *Go to P51* 99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P51*
48. How many new friends have you developed?
 • _____

WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

49. From the main meeting (worship time) of the religious group, Which section do you like the **most**?
 1. The time before worship 2. Music / congregational songs 3. Message / teaching / Sermon 4. Testimonies of other people 5. Announcements 6. Tithes / offerings 7. Special songs 8. Prayer 9. Other ➔ *Go to P54* 10. Ns/Nr – nothing ➔ *Go to P54*
50. From the main meeting (worship time) of the religious group, Which section do you like **less**?
 1. The time before worship 2. Music / congregational songs 3. Message / teaching / Sermon 4. Testimonies of other people 5. Announcements 6. Tithes / offerings 7. Special songs 8. Prayer 9. Other ➔ *Go to P54*

5. Announcements

10. Ns/Nr – nothing ➔ *Go to P54*

51. Always considering the main meeting of the group, Is there anything that results confusing to you, or generates you questions?

1. Yes

2. No ➔ *Go to P58*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P58*

52. Which section of such meeting result to you difficult to understand, confusing, or generates you questions?

1. The time befote worship

6. Tithes / offerings

2. Music / congregational songs

7. Special songs

3. Message / teaching / Sermon

8. Prayer

4. Testimonies of other people

9. Other ➔ *Go to P54*

5. Announcements

10. Ns/Nr – nothing ➔ *Go to P54*

BEING CONTACTED

53. During the last two weeks, Have you had any kind of personal conversation with any of the leaders of the group?

1. Yes

2. No

99. Ns/Nr

54. During the last two weeks, Have anyone from the group has given you a phone call?

1. Yes

2. No ➔ *Go to P29*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P29*

55. Who did call you this time? ➔ *Describe the position that person serves in the group. Check as many as applies*

1. Main leader of the group

2. Other leaders of the group

3. Other no leaders

56. During the last week(s), have you been visited by anyone from this religious group?

1. Yes

2. No ➔ *Go to P32*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P32*

57. When you were visited, Was only one person or several at the time?

1. One person only

2. Several at the time

3. Both ways

58. Who has visited you this time? ➔ *Describe the position of the group. Check as many as applies*

1. Main leader of the group

2. Other leaders of the group

3. Other no leaders

PERSONAL GROWTH

59. Have you participated in any kind of special event that has helping you to grow spiritually?

1. Yes

2. No ➔ *Go to P66*

99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P66*

60. ¿Which kind of activity?

- _____

61. Thinking for a moment in yourself: Would you say that you are a new person since you've been attending this religious group, or you continue being the same person as before?

1. Yes, I am a new person 2. No: I am the same as before ➔ *Go to P68* 99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P68*

62. How would you describe the change you have seen in yourself?

- _____

OTHER ASPECTS

63. Have you observe in this group anything that is not likeable to you?

1. Yes 2. No ➔ *Go to P34* 99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to P34*

64. What have observed that you did not like?

- _____

65. Have you taken time to read, see, or hear materials, or programs which are related to the religious' group you have been visited?

1. Yes 2. No ➔ *Go to the end* 99. Ns/Nr ➔ *Go to the end*

66. Could you provide me with any example?

- _____

67. Usually, How do you get inform about the different activities of this group?

1. Announcements during worship 3. Bulletin or pamphlet 99. Ns/Nr
2. By phone Otro: _____

END

These were all my questions at this time... as I mentioned in the beginning, this study include several interviews. If you allow me I will phone you again next month, to understand how you feel with regard to your upcoming visits to (name of the religious group). **¡Thanks so much for your time!**

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