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Front Door Discipline Cited  
As One Back Door Solution

by Linda Lawson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Many Southern Baptist churches lose nearly as many members through the back door of inactivity as walk in the front door.

Roy Edgemon, director of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's church training department, cited the problem and said new Christians become inactive when they are not helped to understand their faith and to become involved in the programs.

He termed many churches' failure to be as aggressive in helping new Christians grow in their faith as they are in winning people to Christ "the scandal of the Christian church of this century."

"We are morally responsible for new converts," said Edgemon. He likened not helping them understand what Christianity is about to "throwing a new baby into the world without a value system or principles for living."

Statistically, it appears that almost two-thirds of those baptized in Southern Baptist churches in 1980 were left to fend for themselves. While 429,742 persons were baptized, only 151,623 participated in any form of training for new church members, according to the Uniform Church Letter.

"We are bringing people in but are failing them in three areas," said Edgemon. "We are not teaching them who they are in God's family, helping them discover their spiritual gifts or helping them find their place of responsibility and ministry through the local church."

First Baptist Church, Kingston, Tenn., and North Phoenix Baptist Church, Phoenix, Ariz., are among a growing number of churches experimenting with programs to activate inactive members.

"Front door discipline" is how Gary Marsh, pastor of First, Kingston, describes his congregation's efforts. The church sets high demands and is considering steps which will lead to a stronger emphasis on new members attending training sessions on the meaning of salvation, understanding the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement and seeing their responsibilities for ministry through the local church.

The church also has initiated a one-year deacons' associates program. Young adult men work with active deacons and are expected to meet the biblical qualifications of deacons, attend Sunday and Wednesday activities with their families and be tithers or be working on a systematic program of giving. Marsh said 23 men have agreed to participate in the programs for 1981-82.

"With 20 active deacons and 23 associates, we have reduced each person's load from 32 to 15 families in the deacon family ministry program," said Marsh. This will greatly improve the quality of ministry, he noted.

"I preach and teach that if you want to worship and serve God here, we want you. If you just want your name on the roll, we don't want you," said Marsh, who talks with each

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new Christian about their responsibilities before they are baptized. "As a result I think the quality of our members is higher."

North Phoenix instituted the Encourager program in 1980 to provide person-to-person assistance to new Christians.

When a person makes a public decision to accept Christ, he or she is given a copy of the Survival Kit for New Christians to study and is assigned an encourager who is an active member of the Bible study department to which the new person is assigned.

Each of the 900 Encouragers now participating in the program have participated in a one-hour training program and their role is to answer questions, provide support and help the new Christian become involved in the total church program--Bible study, training, visitation and worship.

Minister of Outreach Uri Utterback who administers the Encourager program, said, "I really feel it's a positive approach to the new Christian. It enables them to find new directions in getting involved in the church and to see that through the church there is an alternative to the world."

Utterback noted that being an Encourager also has helped many long-time members to become more active in the total church program.

As general guidelines for helping new Christians, Edgemon suggested planning a training program based on the needs of the church and giving increased emphasis to the value of church membership.

"We communicate that membership is of no value because we don't train new converts in who they are," said Edgemon. "We need to start re-emphasizing the priesthood of the believer: one, God is no respecter of persons; two, we all have equal access to God; and three, we've all been called to ministry."

Also, Edgemon said, a church should establish and communicate to new Christians its expectations of church members.

"Every new Christian should be expected to take some kind of training, such as working through the Survival Kit," he said. "Adult, youth and children's editions are produced by the church training department. This can be the first step toward a disciplined life."

And, he noted, new converts should be expected to engage in continued training and to find a place of ministry. Then, if someone becomes inactive, "there should be an intensive plan for meeting their needs and getting them involved again."

"We should not be satisfied with the inactivity of our members," he said.