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Searcy, Nelson with Jennifer Dykes Henson. *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*. Ventura, California: Gospel Light, 2007. 189 pp. \$14.99.

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Nelson Searcy has authored a number of books in the area of church growth, including *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*. In addition, he has developed over one hundred resources in the area of church growth. He is the pastor of The Journey Church of the City in New York City, which is a church he planted. He also is the head of the Renegade Pastors Network, an organization he started to help pastors achieve God's best for their lives and ministries. He is a sought after conference and convention speaker. In 2013, he was the recipient of the Donald A. McGavran Award for Outstanding Leadership in Great Commission Research. He received a Master of Divinity from Duke University and has pursued additional studies at North Carolina State University, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In typical Nelson Searcy fashion, he uses self-deprecating humor to describe his reasons for writing this book. The Journey Church of the City was launched on Easter Sunday of 2002 with over one hundred people in attendance, "Yet over the next five months, with my dynamic leadership and powerful preaching, I grew the church down to 35... in a city of 8 million" (21). Of course, Searcy was disappointed, and by the prompting of God, he began to do "some research on our church's brief history" (22). He found that the church was not assimilating first-time guests to the church, so he made a concerted effort to understand the process and experience of first-time guests "from their initial experience to follow up" (23). This book is the outcome of his quest.

*Fusion: Turing First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* is a guide to strategically develop an assimilation process (system) that integrates newcomers into the local church, "with the goal of helping them become fully developing followers of Christ" (43-44). "The heart," according to Searcy, "of the Assimilation System is to introduce new people to God and help them become fully developing followers of Jesus Christ" (151). Searcy proclaims, "If you decide to make improvements in the way you assimilate newcomers, you will see growth. Period" (161). According to Searcy, the process begins with asking a

simple question, “How well am I assimilating people now?” (31) This requires that the church know the answer to the following questions: (1) How many people attend? (2) How many guests attend during the year? and (3) How many of the guests remain and become active in the church? (31)

Once this information is gathered, the system is built around a three-step process that moves visitors to membership.

1. Turn a first-time guest into a second-time guest.
2. Turn a second-time guest into a regular attender.
3. Turn a regular attender into a fully developing member (44).

This “system” is designed to “bridge the gap” that exists on the path toward membership. The following six assimilation “buzz” words are the key: “Return, Relationships, Responsibility, Stay, Stick, and Serve” (46).

The key for first-time guests begins before the service. The goal is to create “an environment that makes your first-time guests feel welcomed and respected” (53). According to Searcy, the goal of influencing “your guests during the pre-service [is achieved] through controlling how they are: Greeted, Directed, Treated and Seated” (52). When the first “process” is done well, it helps to achieve the goal “to come back” (64).

The second step in the process is “Follow Up.” “Follow-through is not optional; it’s integral” (86), according to Searcy. Follow-up must be fast, friendly, and functional (86). Fast follow-up includes “offering a free gift” (87) after the service for a guest, an email 36 hours after their first visit, a letter 96 hours later, and a letter one month later. The letters sent 96 hours later and one month later also need to include a gift. “I have found that growing churches spend \$400 to \$500 on evangelism for each person who walks through the door as a first-time guest” (97). Follow-up is important because Searcy believes that a church should “reach rather than reclaim” (100). Churches that grow “put their energy into reaching new people,” whereas “struggling churches focus on reclaiming people who have passed through and fallen away” (100). The same process is followed when a person returns for a second visit with an opportunity to “go deeper” offered in the e-mail and letters.

Searcy also recommends developing “sticky situations” as a means of bridging the gap between people who attend and people who stay. The “three sticky situations” Searcy recommends are small groups, fun events, and service teams (122). Sticky situations provide the relational glue that keeps “your guests and your church bound together” (122). The goal is to have every adult attender in a small group. Searcy indicates that his church has met this goal. “Our small groups generally yield 100-percent church participation. That means we keep close to 100 percent of the new attenders who choose to get involved in a group” (123). The hyperbole is beyond

credibility in this statement. To say that they have one hundred percent participation defines participation in a way that makes no sense or in a way that skews the numbers to justify the ends, and this practice is questionable at best.

This is not the only place that Searcy's system and logic come up short. First, Searcy asserts, "The average leader I work with is experiencing about a 1/20 assimilation rate. That rate translates to some growth. While anything better than 1/20 should lead to solid growth, I suggest that you pray for an assimilation rate of 1/3" (37). The issue with Searcy's numbers here, as well as other places in this book, is that there is no quantifiable data to back up his claims. He just gives anecdotal evidence, "the average leader I work with" (37), and expects his statement to be treated as fact. It would be quite helpful if a survey was created and given to "the average leader" to determine the true assimilation rate of those churches with which he works. A second problem, with very close ties to the first issue, is Searcy's statement that keeping one in every twenty visitors guarantees "some growth" (37). Again, his statement is based on opinion not fact, or at least quantifiable fact. For example, if a church keeps one in every twenty visitors and no one, for any reason, leaves the church, "some growth" will occur; but if normal attrition rates occur, keeping one visitor in every twenty will not lead to growth.

A third concern is allowing first response team members "to sign your name or the name of that week's teacher" (102). Searcy goes on to state, "not only is it acceptable for them to sign in your stead, but I highly recommend it" (102). His rationale for letting others sign his name was that it was more "effective for both the follow-up strategy and for me as a pastor with other responsibilities to turn an area completely over" (102) to others. What is most troubling about this view is that it seems disingenuous. The importance of time management and using time wisely is important for any pastor, yet to have someone else sign a letter comes across as insincere. That is especially true when the next sentence in the book reads as follows: "Remember: everything speaks to your guest, and they don't stop listening when the service ends" (103). If the pastor is too busy to sign a letter that sends a specific message, then such a message should not be sent with the pastor's signature.

Finally, Searcy's book is a helpful resource for pastors, church staff, churches leaders, denominational leaders, and church transition organizations that all deal with some of the complexities of assimilating first-time guests into the local church. The book offers helpful, although not new, insights, challenges, and assumptions, as well as suggestions that can easily be put into practice, which could lead to much greater success in growing local churches.