

City Bible Church (formerly Bible Temple)



Associate Pastor, Marc Estes

The purpose of the study was to identify transferable principles and practices used by churches that have been successful in attracting and assimilating unchurched people. The following is a summary of a leadership interview, three new Christian interviews, a survey of printed materials and an on site visit.

Question #1. What principles and practices used by these churches have been most successful in attracting and evangelizing unchurched people?

City Bible Church, formerly Bible Temple, was founded in 1951 by “Ivy” and Sylva Iverson. In 1961, their son, Dick Iverson, took the pastoral leadership of the church until 1995 when Pastor Frank Demazio became the senior pastor. Since 1967, the church has graduated leaders from its own full-time training center, Portland Bible College. Also, over the years, they have planted over thirty outreach churches and sent out many missionaries. All this is a reflection of their three-fold vision: “Exalting the Lord” through worship and service; “Equipping the Saints” for spiritual maturity and effective ministry; and “Extending the Kingdom of God” through the church, to the city, the nation and the world, through aggressive evangelism, training leaders, planting churches and sending missionaries and mission teams.

CELL OUTREACH: City Bible uses small groups, called City Cells as the primary means for mobilizing people for evangelism. Every other cell meeting is an evangelistic outreach. This helps maintain a healthy balance between in-reach and out-reach. The cells are continually hosting outreach barbecues and picnics or doing acts of service in their neighborhoods or within their sphere of influence. The church also has specific small groups that are evangelism directed. They have English as Second Language (ESL) classes where they have forty or fifty people who are unsaved. City Bible also has servant evangelism outreaches: a bread ministry, food ministries, and clothing ministries. “One of the greatest things that God is blessing right now is our outreach to kids in apartment complexes,” states Associate Pastor, Mark Estes. “We have five bus routes right now where we actually bus kids up here on a Saturday morning for Saturday ‘Sunday School.’” Then cell leaders go in and plant cell groups in the apartment complexes where those children live.

Participant Summary: “Attracting and Assimilating the Unchurched in the 21st Century”
A study of leading churches in the Portland/Vancouver area.

ETHNIC OUTREACH: “We have a real strong burden to touch a lot of the unreached people groups of our city,” declares Estes. “So we have started an ethnic district of small groups.” Their goal is to bring these people into the church rather than start a lot of little churches all over the city. They target certain people groups or certain ethnic groups and begin to work with them—Laotian, Sudanese, Indians, Russians, Romanians, whatever the case may be. They actually go in and begin to penetrate those people groups with small groups and outreaches and they have been quite effective at bringing them in.

OUTREACH EMPHASIS: “There has been a huge shift in the church,” explains Estes. “For many years we have been known primarily as a strong bible-teaching, family-oriented church which has brought in a lot of transplants. But as we have pushed the throttle down in ‘harvest’ we are bringing in Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholics, White Magic, Satanists, Jews, and homosexuals. That’s what we are praying for, that’s what we are believing for. Jesus went after the poor, the sick, the lost, the abused, the accused, and the accursed. And so we have really gone out and targeted people that fit that profile.” Business people are reaching business people through their cell groups. Family cell groups are reaching families of like kind. City Bible is very multigenerational and multicultural with each people group within the church reaching those like themselves in order to build and strengthen the church.



PERSONAL INVITATION: “I think that the only way we are going to get the city into the church is to get the church into the city. The church is the people, ultimately, it is our love, care and compassion that draws people and attracts them to the church,” states Estes. The church doesn’t do a great deal of advertising. Instead, they provide special events and a dynamic cooperate worship gathering and encourage their people to invite their friends. A great number of the visitors who come do so because they were personally invited. Estes attributes much of the church’s growth and retention of visitors to the fact that, with many, relationships were established prior to coming into

the church. “Our premise is that evangelism isn’t what you do, it’s who you are! We are trying to get it into the life of people that it is something they do in the workplace, while they are at the softball field with their kids—looking for the most natural, relational opportunities in order to bring people to Christ.”

PRODUCTIONS: The “Eternity Play” is an example of a special outreach production that members use to invite their unchurched friends. Three new Christians that were interviewed indicated that the play was how they were first introduced to City Bible, in fact, one stated, “I wouldn’t have chosen this church if I hadn’t been given Eternity Play tickets.” He and his two sons accepted Christ the night they attended.

ATTRACTIVE WORSHIP: “People are greatly attracted to our church because they feel the love of people and the love of God,” explains Estes. “Once they get here I think they are attracted because the presence of God is very strong here. We work on the corporate gathering so that when people do come they really sense the presence of God.” The gospel message is presented at every worship service. Estes states, “We see people saved every service. It can be from 5-50 in a weekend. We know that lost people are coming so we present the gospel through altar calls.”

Question #2. How do these churches welcome and follow-up unchurched visitors and new converts?

WELCOME: From the moment a visitor walks onto their property or into the worship service City Bible seeks to make their guests feel welcomed. They try to create a friendly environment by requiring that every pastor be in the foyer to welcome guests and members before each service. They also have roaming greeters. This way, by the time a person gets into the worship center they will have shaken hands with five or six people. “Church growth experts have told us that people want to remain anonymous; they don’t want to be bothered, so don’t call them,” explains Estes. “I had lived that and assumed that because it is written it must be true. But the reality is that when I came here we would have eighty to ninety visitors a weekend and we would say, ‘just fill out the card and put it in the offering.’ We got 10 out of 80 cards back. One Sunday morning I felt the Holy Spirit prompt me to turn that visitor presentation of our service into an ‘alter call.’ I said, ‘for years we have said just fill out the card, but right now, I know that many of you are hurting here today. You came here for a reason, God wants to meet your need, we want to pray for you but the only way we can pray for you and meet your need is if you allow us into your life. So, what we need you to do is to take this card out, fill it out, write down your prayer request and I want to tell you that beginning tomorrow morning I will get 50 people that will begin to pray for you. We will call you Tuesday. If you have a need—an emotional need, a marriage problem, a relational tragedy, financial crisis—we want to help you get through that.’ That Sunday we had 80 out of 90 cards turned in. And God showed me we were on to something. The motive behind why we wanted their names has a great bearing on whether they will give you the card or not. Now as we call, and back our word with actions, we keep six out of 10 people, which is unheard of. So we are very aggressive and very intentional with the first time visitors to our church.”

VISITOR FOLLOW-UP: “From the moment someone walks on the property of our church or into one of our cells until the day they leave the church, they will receive

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ongoing calls, they will receive ongoing prayer, ongoing care, their needs will be met," declares Estes. The ministry he has established to facilitate this is called 'City Care'. Through the use of the phone, there are four main things that City Care seeks to provide a visitor: first, prayer; second, building a relationship; third, meeting needs; and fourth, to help assimilate the visitor. Estes explains, "If you come to our church you will receive a call every week until you are assimilated. You also will receive ongoing prayer and intercession. We will continue to meet your needs, we call you, we love you, we pray for you. The foundation of what we are doing is prayer. We believe that God is a God of miracles and we know that you have needs in your life, which is why you came to our church, you were searching for something. We believe God can meet your needs. We've experienced people getting healed over the phone, we have seen marriages restored and we've had people get jobs and receive miracles in their finances."



NEW CONVERT FOLLOW-UP: Any person who goes to the altar is going to have a discipler who is going to build a relationship with them. The church also provides a 4-lesson curriculum called Turning Points that can be covered one-on-one or in a small group. The ultimate goal in each follow-up approach is to get the new convert into relationship immediately within the context of the cell. If they came with a friend the church will try to place them in a cell where that friend is also connected. Relationship supercedes geography. So they will place them into a cell where they have an existing relationship with an individual in addition to coordinating with a cell leader to work with them using the Turning Points curriculum.

Question #3. How do these churches provide an opportunity for new people to gain a sense of belonging?

Cell groups are the primary means by which new people and new converts gain a sense of belonging at City Bible. There are two major components of the City Cell ministry. The first priority of a City Cell is caring for and ministering to every member of City Bible Church. Each cell is a network of relationships that assist in creating a

smaller family of believers, each devoted to one another. Connecting people to small groups at City Bible is not considered an option, but a mandate. The second priority of a City Cell is developing a group of believers who joyfully share their faith with others and meeting their needs. There must be a balance between in-reach and out-reach for every cell. Either way it is based on building relationships.

If a person accepts Christ at a worship service and doesn't have any relationship within the church already they meet with a discipler and are immediately put into a “New Life” cell that is primarily filled with new converts. The cell leaders work with these new converts to rapidly establish a relationship and connect them—sometimes four to six times a week to help get them on track. They will help them through struggles, get them food or clothing. If an unmarried couple is living together, they will help get them find appropriate housing. Whatever the needs they will seek to help, not only spiritually, but also emotionally and physically—in every area of their life in order to equip the whole person.

Question #4. How do these churches see that people are disciplined into fully devoted followers of Christ?

“We want every person to become a healthy reproducing member,” states Estes. “So, we’ve taken the four-stage process that Jesus used to make disciples--calling, training, sending, reproducing.” These four stages have been further defined in what is called the “Assimilation Freeway.” First, the “overpass,” represents “Reaching the Unchurched.” Second, the “onramp,” refers to “Guest Awareness” which includes greeting, securing guest cards and the guest reception. The third step in assimilation is the first lane of the freeway, “City Care Guest Follow-up and New Convert Follow-up.” Fourth, is “City Cells,” the second of five lanes. Membership is the next lane that is followed by the “School of Equipping.” The final step is the fast lane, “Leadership: Reproducing.” It is City Bible’s goal to move everyone from the overpass (unchurched) onto the freeway and ultimately end up in the fast lane—an active reproducing member of City Bible Church.

Diagram of Assimilation Freeway
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In addition to the corporate gatherings, there are two main ways that City Bible helps disciples become mature and grow in their faith —City Cells and the School of Equipping. Eighty percent of the cells meet twice a month on Sunday nights so that the people have the rest of the week to be in the community (though City Bible does allow cells to meet at other times as well). The School of Equipping meets on the remaining two Sunday evenings each month from 6:00 – 8:15 PM. There are eight training tracks from which to choose: Harvesting Ministries, Prayer Intercession, Family Life, Biblical Studies, Spiritual Growth, Church Life, Ethnic Ministries, and Youth Issues. Each track offers 100, 200, 300 and 400 level classes. “Everything that we do in training our people has to fit within the School of Equipping track and time frame,” states Estes. The bigger we get the more we have to protect the schedule and keep from burning everyone out on staff. We’ve tried to put everything into that slot—City Cells and School of Equipping.

“I have traveled all over the world looking at cell models and I’ve noticed that often they can be three thousand miles wide but they are a quarter inch deep,” declares Estes. “Because of time commitments and the willingness of people to give only so many hours to any given church activity, if your cells meet weekly you are going to find that there’s a lot less commitment to the maturation process through equipping and teaching. It is important to us that there be width to the church but also depth to the church. So, we have cells and School of Equipping that alternate every other week—bi-weekly School of Equipping and bi-weekly cells. We not only want relationships established, the gospel preached and our church extended but we also want depth and maturity. So we have found this to be the best model for us.”

The involvement of the City Cell Leader is critical in helping their cell members grow spiritually. Each City Cell will have people on different parts of the “Assimilation Freeway.” Some may have just become Christians and need to be placed in the lane for new believer follow-up, some may be in the lane for membership class, while others may be in the fast lane for leadership: reproducing. It is the City Cell leader’s objective to assist each person in moving forward in his or her spiritual development.

Question #5. How do these churches help people take up the responsibility to serve in personal ministry?

Newcomers are encouraged to begin entry-level areas of ministry very quickly and those who are in a cell begin to serve almost immediately in that group context. Estes explains, “People will stay in your church for 3 reasons: because they feel accepted, because they feel they belong and they feel like they have significance. So, we have to create that, not only in relationships, but also belonging and significance. We must answer their internal questions, ‘do I have something to offer here, do I perceive that they value me?’ So, cell leaders are encouraged to include people in service within their cells immediately. We don’t want our people to be pew warmers. We want to get them serving immediately in non-leadership roles through cells and other entry-level ministries. However, we do not take new people and allow them to serve in leadership positions until they have gone through our membership process, are actively involved in a cell and are tithing.”

Assimilation Study - Participant Information (Fall 2000)

Church Name City Bible Church, (formerly Bible Temple) Region NE Portland
Street Address 9200 NE Fremont
City Portland State OR Zip Code 97220
Phone 503-255-2224 FAX 503-256-9637
Web site www.citybiblechurch.org

1. Denomination non-denominational
2. Date church was founded 1951
3. Founding Senior Pastor Ivy & Sylva Iverson Years in this church 1951-61
4. Founding Senior Pastor Dick & Edie Iverson Years in this church 1961-95
5. Current Senior Pastor Frank & Sharon Damazio Years in this church 1995-present

Map/ Photos:

