

**Using Design to Facilitate Personal Engagement  
in a Church Community**

By  
Randall Robert Blair

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Design and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

---

Chairperson Michael Eckersley, Ph.D.

---

Richard Branham, Ph.D.

---

Dennis L. Rosen, Ph.D.

Date Defended: December 15, 2010

The Thesis Committee for Randall Robert Blair  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

**Using Design to Facilitate Personal Engagement  
in a Church Community**

---

Chairperson Michael Eckersley, Ph.D.

Date approved: December 15, 2010

## **Abstract**

Small to mid-sized community churches face many challenges developing the services that will fulfill the needs of members and non-members and deliver them in a way that fits the way we live in a modern society. Their long-term survival depends largely on their ability to attract and engage prospective members. Exploration of this topic has shown that the level of affinity, understanding of culture, volunteer opportunities and a feeling of authenticity towards engagement with the community are critical factors for people deciding where to put their physical and emotional energy. Using a service design approach, churches can take a systemic look at enhancing the experience for visitors in these areas.

## **Acknowledgements**

I must first thank my wife, Polly, for her love, support and patience. She has been the best partner, sounding board and butt kicker a man could ask for. I also want to thank all my colleagues in the Interaction Design and Design Management programs at the University of Kansas. Thank you to Richard and Michael for sharing your experience, to Ricarda, Georgette, Eric, Angel, Torry, Chris, Alice and Ryan for sharing ideas and opening my eyes to new approaches to solving problems.

## Introduction

Small to mid-sized community churches face the same challenges that other organizations do. It is difficult to develop the right kinds of services that will fulfill the needs of members and non-members and deliver them in a way that fits the way we live in a modern society. The long-term survival of these organizations, and in turn the survival of the services offered to their community, depends largely on their ability to attract and engage prospective members.

Exploration of this topic has shown that the level of affinity, timeliness and feeling of authenticity towards engagement with the organization are critical factors for people deciding where to put their physical and emotional energy. The question I wanted to answer was: How can design help visitors feel comfortable with a church belief system while also encouraging personal connections and engagement?

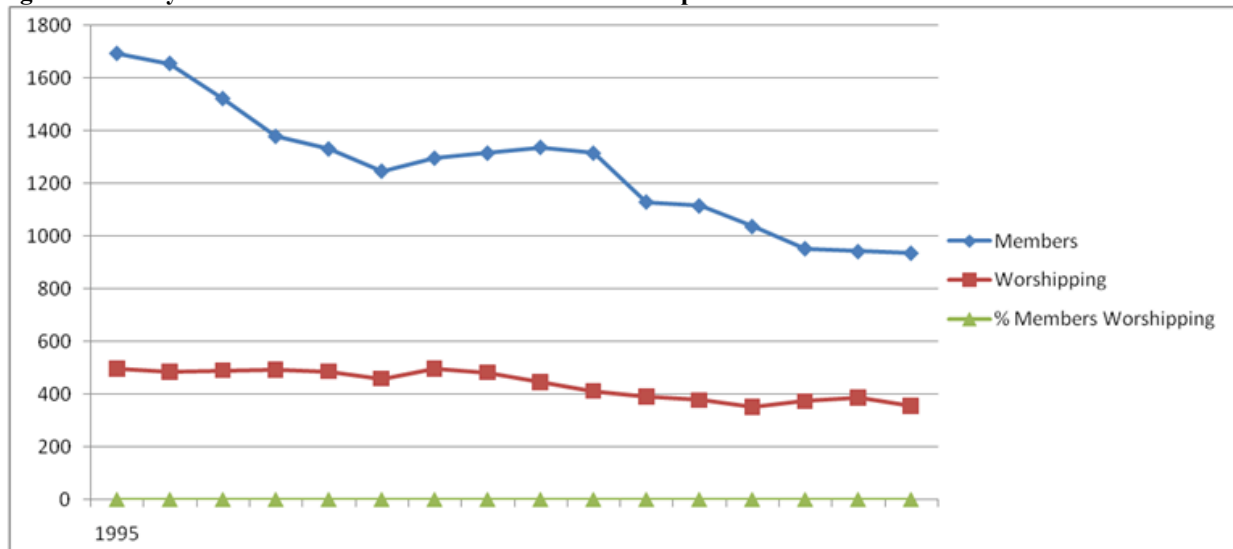
I worked in cooperation with Valley View United Methodist Church in Overland Park, Kansas. They provided me access to their facility, membership and staff so that the project may, in turn, enhance the experience of their constituents.

Existing research on the subject of visitor preference is largely based on survey data. There does not seem to be a great deal of design work done in the area of visitor experience. The National Council of Churches' *2010 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* reports that The United Methodist Church, ranked 3rd in terms of size, reported 7,853,987 members, down 0.98 percent from the previous measurement.<sup>i</sup>

Valley View United Methodist Church has 907 members as of August 2010 and there is concern among the church leadership about their shrinking numbers. Membership at Valley View UMC is at its lowest point in the last 16 years (1995-2010). Numbers attending worship are at their lowest point in the same period.<sup>ii</sup> There is an understanding that the church needs to

take action to curb the decline and to grow the members that might add to the longevity of the church. As it stands, 47% of current members are more than 60 years old and there is a 30% decrease between members in their 40s and members in their 30s.

**Figure 1: Valley View United Methodist Church Membership Trends**



With 85 stated ministries and only 17 part-time staff members, it is clear that Valley View United Methodist Church, like many churches its size, will continue to rely heavily on their volunteer members to provide service to visitors.

One of the best references focusing on the “Visitor Experience” comes from the book *Catch* written by pastors at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection has grown from four people in 1990 to over 12,000 adult members with an average weekly worship attendance of over 7,500 in 2008. The church was listed as the most influential mainline church in America in a 2005 survey of American pastors.<sup>iii</sup>

In *Catch*, they offer practical and specific advice for churches looking to grow their membership. They do this by telling the history of what they have done to grow so quickly and

the wins and losses along the way. Much of the advice is marketing focused, but as with all services, every touch point matters. In that way, they are focused on the overall experience and do utilize what could be considered design techniques. They describe how they “design” the worship service for maximum impact and also include a section that advises churches to have their trustees walk their church buildings and grounds “through the eyes of a visitor.”<sup>iv</sup>

In an interview I conducted with Debi Nixon, co-author of *Catch*, she explained that, “one of the big differentiators for Church of the Resurrection is that hospitality is part of our DNA. It’s a value. It’s a part of what we do and of how we do things. We are always asking the question, ‘How is somebody engaging with Church of the Resurrection?’ whether it be asking if you want a cup of coffee to how you engage with the website.”

What she is talking about are services by way of experiences. A church is a collection of service touch points that form an experience. Services have been defined from several points of view, but the one I tend to like best is the Sasser, Olson, Wyckoff definition.<sup>v</sup> It states that a service has four key characteristics:

**Intangibility.** The offering is largely or wholly intangible.

**Heterogeneity.** The offering is different each time it is consumed.

**Inseparability.** Production and consumption are inseparable.

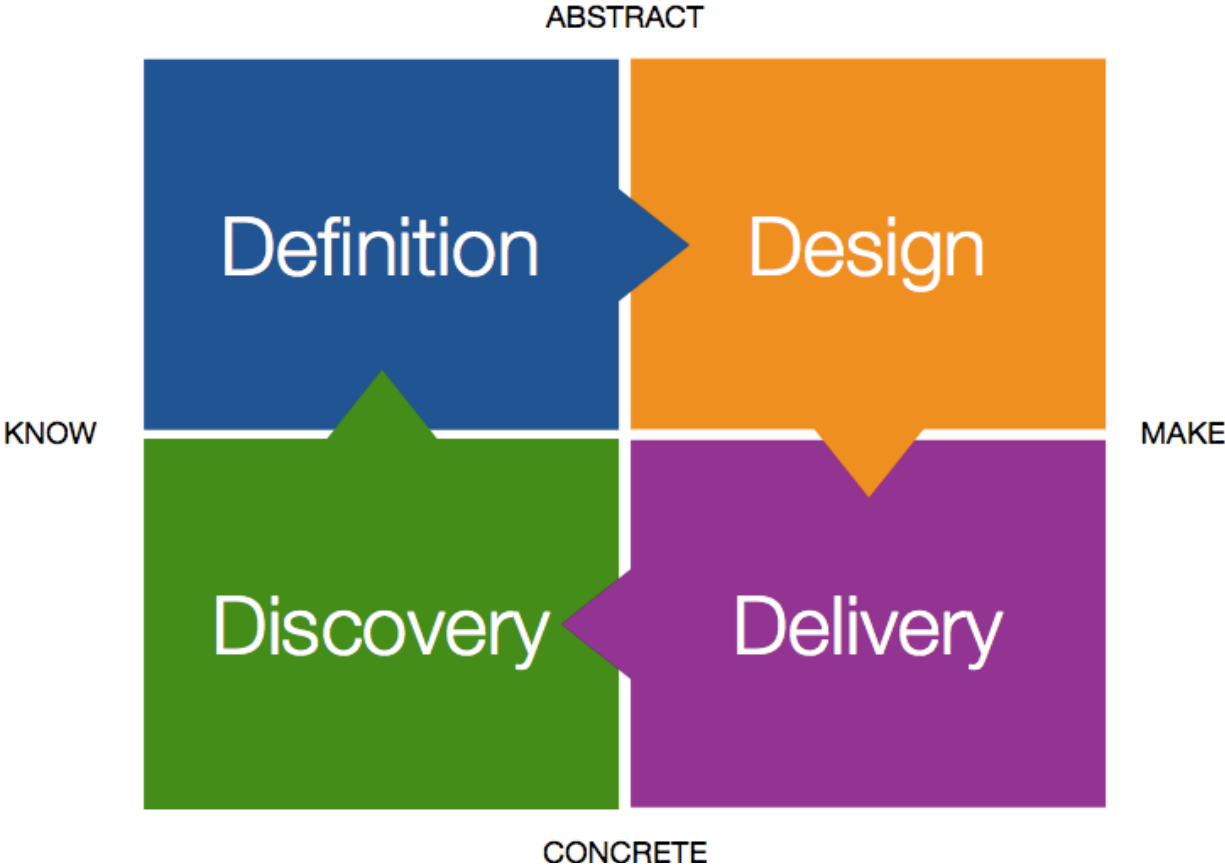
**Perishability.** The offering cannot be stored in inventory.

For this problem area, it makes sense to take a Service Design Approach to its solutions. Service Design can be defined as “Design for experiences that reach people through many different touch-points, and that happen over time.”<sup>vi</sup> But how is Service Design different from Interaction Design? They really aren’t that different. They both use a human-centered design process. But a Service Designer tends to think more holistically and approaches a design problem from a system perspective, not just the interaction between a person and a product.<sup>vii</sup>

# Design Process

To explore the situation of the visitor experience with Valley View United Methodist Church, I followed a design process that allowed me to understand and represent the actions, environments, individuals, and objects that I encountered. The design approach I took is based on a commonly utilized creative process by which the designer must first “Know” then “Make.”<sup>viii</sup>

Figure 2: User Centered Design Model



## Discovery Phase

Knowing begins with a “Discovery” phase in which data is gathered on users and context through research in the real world. For several weeks I observed the behavior of visitors and



church members as they went through their Sunday morning experience at the church building noting patterns and workarounds for certain problems encountered. To better understand the motivations and needs of users I conducted direct user interviews. These conversations were approximately 45 minutes in length and were conducted using a non-structured interview technique. The only directional question asked was at the start of the interview where I asked them to “tell me about your experience when visiting or looking for a new church community.” The “five whys” technique<sup>ix</sup> was used when possible to try to extract the salient points of the conversation. Interview data was recorded and coded for further analysis.

I took many photographs of the built environment taking care to capture variances in navigation systems, sensory elements and other artifacts within each of the church behavior settings. To understand the communication being produced, I collected samples of dozens of published pieces that are intended for visitors of the church. This additional information from the tools, systems, information and environment helped to build a stronger understanding of user context.

Grounded Theory was the approach I used to collect and code interviews and observations. I coded the data with a bias toward concepts and categories that related to engagement, context of use and other situational factors. Grounded Theory emphasizes creation of theory from data in the process of research.<sup>x</sup> The output of the research, specifically insights related to unmet user needs, will drive the decision of what process or tool should be designed to best support the user and organization needs.

## **Definition Phase**

“Definition” phase uses contextual knowledge to begin to frame insights by analysis. At this point I wanted to use the information I had collected to create a map of a visitor experience.

The experience map is a qualitative view of a user experience through user interaction with service touch points, their emotions, sensations and perceptions of the service as it relates to their expectations. It maps the user through five modes of experience: Attract, Enter, Engage, Exit, Reflect.<sup>xi</sup> I took comments and insight from the interviews as well as timelines and observed behavior from my site visits to generate the map. This was helpful to understand the tasks and touch points a typical user might go through. Additional maps would begin to reveal more concrete patterns that would be even stronger evidence of experience opportunities.

The primary analysis method I used for the creation of user requirements was needs cluster analysis. This strategy looks to create an intersection between customer requirements (what they want to achieve) and customer behavioral modes (how they go about achieving it).<sup>xii</sup> The process is as follows.

***Understand domain people and activity.***

Based on my previous interviews and observations I created a 2x2 matrix of participant types with the X and Y being Passive/Passionate and Outsider/Insider. Each quadrant noted qualities that were common for that particular combination.

***Based on observation, what are the common user behaviors/actions/activities.***

I determined six user behavioral modes that would be used to help generate requirements.

- **Community Consumer Outsider** utilizes the service offerings of the community without additional ties to the community. Has potential to become more involved but may only use the services and have no interest in further engagement.
- **Cautious Outsider** has had unsatisfactory experiences with previous communities. Resists engagement unless asked. Is curious about the community but wants to be certain they are comfortable before making even small commitments.

- **Affinity Seeking Outsider** wants to be in a community primarily where they feel a strong affinity with the beliefs, messages, and actions of its members. Overall environment is critical to their satisfaction.
- **Altruistic Outsider** wants to be in a community primarily to perform acts of service to the general public they can be fully committed to. They are comfortable with the communities' values and would like to make personal connections. They have a can-do attitude when committed.
- **Welcoming Insider** wants to ensure anyone who wants to be part of the organization can be. Willing to do what is necessary for the betterment of the community. Acts as a mentor to new and interested people.
- **Territorial Insider** is satisfied with the community status quo and does not mind change as long as it doesn't impact them. Mainly interacts with the same people. Has carved out their own space in the community and has little interest in engaging with new people.

*Determine Requirements. Motivations, hopes, preferences, desired outcomes.*

Again, from previous observation and interview, I developed a list of requirements.

Requirements are not specific to one behavioral mode, they can apply to several.

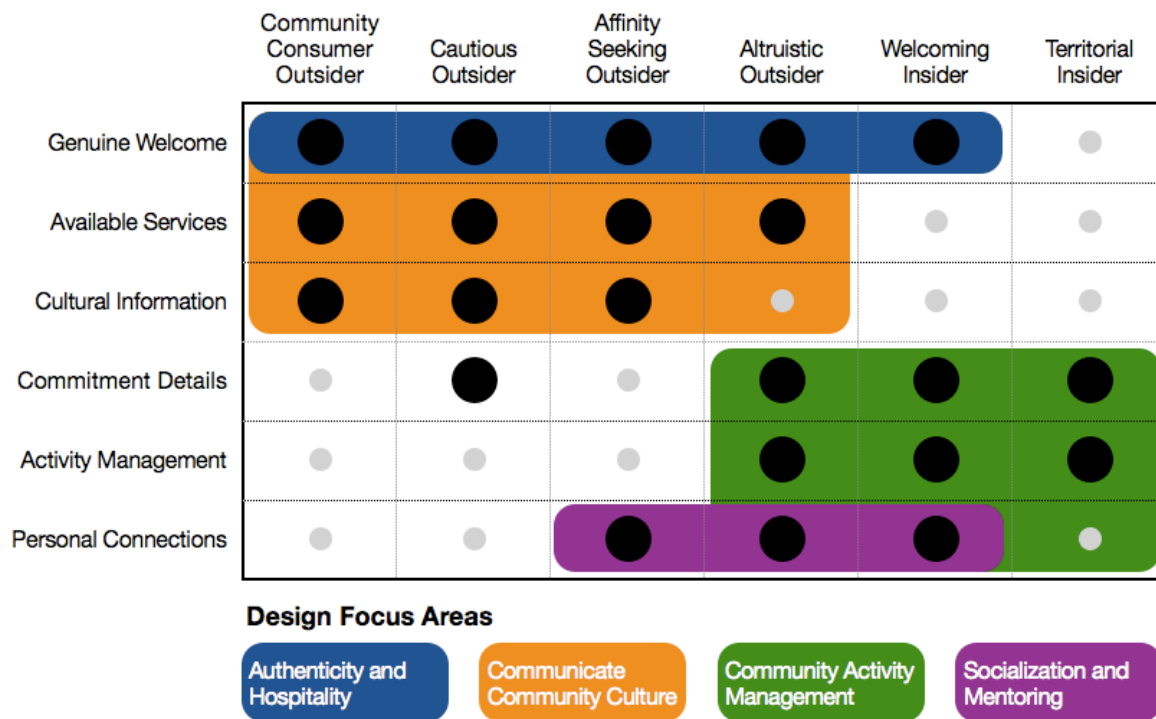
- **Commitment Details-** The user needs to clearly understand the time required and logistics before committing to an activity or group.
- **Activity Management-** The user needs the ability to manage communication, group involvement and donations of time and money.
- **Cultural Information-** The user needs information to understand the beliefs, values and culture of the community.
- **Personal Connections-** The user should be able to make new personal connections and strengthen existing ones.

- **Available Services**- The user should be able to explore the services offered by the community to the public.
- **Genuine Welcome**- The user should feel genuinely welcomed and included in the community.

**Cluster the modes and requirements.**

Using behavior modes and requirements, I created a matrix view with modes as X and requirements as Y. I represented the relevance of need by putting a large dot in the cells. I then visually sorted the rows and columns looking for groupings. I was then able to identify the clusters and describe the need indicated.

**Figure 3: User Needs Cluster Matrix**



### ***Identify and Present solution areas.***

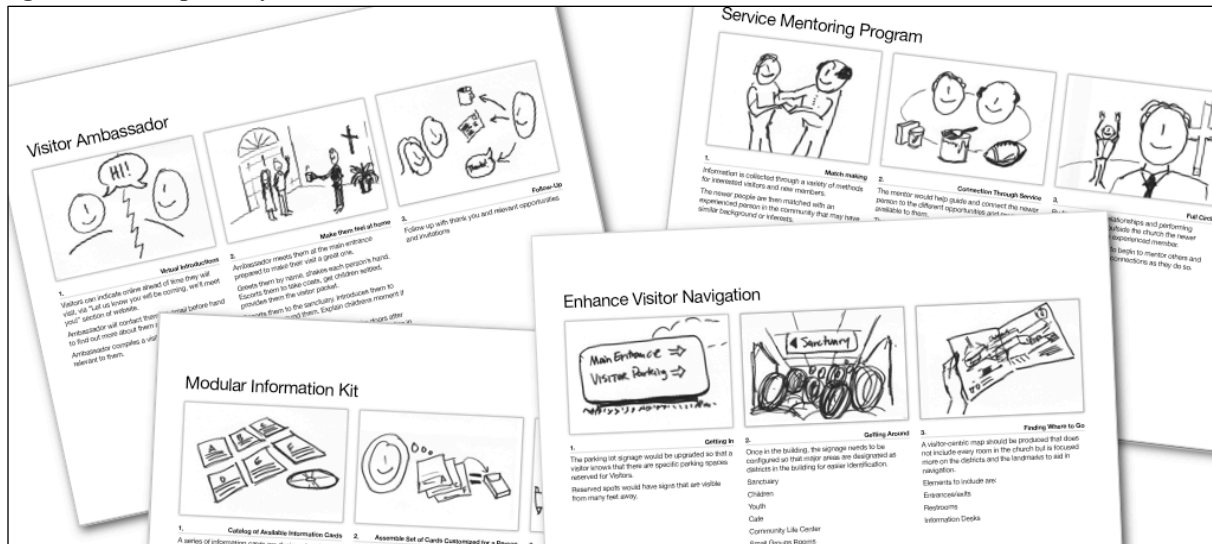
Solution architecture is a simple information structure used to organize ideas and directions. It can show how current offering meet/don't meet these needs. For Valley View, the needs cluster analysis pointed to four main areas of design focus:

- Authenticity and Hospitality
- Communicate Community Culture
- Community Activity Management
- Socialization and Mentoring

### **Design Phase**

Knowing informs Making as we take these abstract insights into a “Design” phase and generate new concepts of what “could be.” With the brainstorming help of members of the church, ideas that came out of initial interviews, and ideas noted during observation we generated a list of approximately seventy elements, features and concepts targeting those four design focus areas. Those ideas were organized into groups that would be potential enhancements of both tangible and intangible designs. The strongest concepts were drawn into three-panel storyboards to help illustrate the interactions and artifacts involved in these service enhancements.

**Figure 4: Concept Storyboards**



## Delivery Phase

The last phase is to realize these concepts as prototype designs to be tested and implemented in “Delivery.” To help people understand how a new service enhancement might be delivered, three of the four ideas were included in a concept video of a service enhancement for the church called “Visitor Ambassador.” This video explores the conceptual design of the Visitor Ambassador, an enhanced service of the church that helps visitors make instant connections to the church through a personal guide who can answer any question. The service consists of virtual and physical interactions with a representative of the church who may then deliver communication and navigation tools to the visitor.

## Conclusion

There are many avenues to explore that may help set Valley View United Methodist church membership goals heading in the right direction. By taking a more holistic approach to understanding the visitor experience we learned how the many touch points of a church must

work together to satisfy the need for authenticity and honesty, personal connection and affinity. But the concepts are clear. Be real, be respectful of your constituent's time and passion, and always be looking for ways to support the creation of personal connections.

---

## Works Cited

- <sup>i</sup> "National Council of Churches USA." Inside the National Council of Churches.  
<http://www.nccusa.org/news/100204yearbook2010.html> (accessed October 6, 2010).
- <sup>ii</sup> Blair, Polly. Interview by author. Email interview. Overland Park, KS, December 10, 2010.
- <sup>iii</sup> "Church of the Resurrection : Greater Kansas City Area - Leawood, KS." Church of the Resurrection : Greater Kansas City Area - Leawood, KS. <http://www.cor.org/> (accessed October 6, 2010).
- <sup>iv</sup> Nixon, Debi Williams, and Adam Hamilton. *Catch: attracting and connecting visitors*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2009.
- <sup>v</sup> Sasser, W. Earl, Richard Paul Olsen, and D. Daryl Wyckoff. *Management of service operations: text, cases, and readings*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978.
- <sup>vi</sup> "servicedesign.org." servicedesign.org. [http://www.servicedesign.org/glossary/service\\_design/](http://www.servicedesign.org/glossary/service_design/) (accessed December 14, 2010).
- <sup>vii</sup> Hegeman, Jamin . "Jamin Hegeman-Service Design: An Interaction Design Perspective." Keynote speech, Interaction 10 from IXDA, Savannah, GA, February 4, 2010.
- <sup>viii</sup> Kumar, Vijay. "Innovation Planning Toolkit." Keynote speech, FUTUREGROUND International Conference from Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Melbourne, November 17, 2004.
- <sup>ix</sup> "5 Whys and active listening | learn.logic." Learn Logic. <http://www.learnlogic.net/5whys-and-active-listening/> (accessed November 6, 2010).
- <sup>x</sup> "Grounded Theory Institute - The Grounded Theory Methodology of Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D - What is GT?." Grounded Theory Institute - The Grounded Theory Methodology of Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D - Home. <http://www.groundedtheory.com/what-is-gt.aspx> (accessed October 6, 2010).
- <sup>xi</sup> Finlay, Chris. "Its Not About The Smoothie." Its Not About The Smoothie.  
<http://www.slideshare.net/chrisfinlay/its-not-about-the-smoothie-presentation> (accessed November 12, 2010).
- <sup>xii</sup> Alexis, Jeremy. "Needs Clusters: a research strategy for accelerating usercentered design innovation." *IIT*, Spring 2006. [http://trex.id.iit.edu/papers/alexis\\_needsclusters.pdf](http://trex.id.iit.edu/papers/alexis_needsclusters.pdf) (accessed January 29, 2009).