

The Case for Healthy Church Membership

Church membership should not consist of *rules* to keep people out, but *ramps* to help people grow.

Membership in a local church may seem outdated or unnecessary, but if led well, it adds great strength to your church.

Candidly, nearly all churches have some form of “membership.”

- Some formal, calling it **church membership**.
- Others informal, using words like **belonging, discipleship, culture, team, or community**, etc.

Both are referring to the same idea, but with different words, in a different style, and with differing amounts of emphasis.

I’ve served in two churches that are part of The Wesleyan Church, a great denomination. In both churches, I’ve taught all or part of the membership class for many years.

It’s been my practice to remain after the class and field questions from anyone who wants to talk. I’ve listened to thousands of questions over thirty years.

These are among the five most often asked questions.

1. What if my spouse is not a believer?
2. What if I’m not sure about being baptized?
3. What if I don’t have time to serve in a ministry?
4. What if I can’t give a full tithe?
5. What if I’m not qualified to be a leader?

These questions are packed with doubt and uncertainty. Those who have asked these questions wonder if they measure up to what they’ve been encouraged to embrace for spiritual growth.

In each case I emphasize a grace-filled path for growth rather than an either-or, you are in or out, kind of membership loaded up with a list of do’s and don’ts, rules and requirements.

Church membership is most effective when you emphasize vision, values, teamwork, and life change. Church growth is essential, but focus on the growth of the person, not the growth of the church.

I’ve wondered at times why questions like the five I mentioned arise in a class taught with so much grace, encouragement, and opportunity. So, I’ve asked those who attend.

The most common response includes two things:

1) Their church background.

Their previous experience is not always positive. They have often only known a list of do's and mostly don'ts.

2) Culture is changing – rapidly.

Membership is no longer something desired unless there is perceived value. People want to be part of something they value.

Membership in current culture does work, from frequent flyer miles on Delta to discounts at Costco, and from a free sandwich at Subway to Prime Membership with Amazon where you receive free shipping.

People do join where they perceive value.

This might sound like an approach that builds consumer Christians, that's not at all what I want to communicate.

In fact, it's the opposite. Let's not use the word membership for a minute.

Maybe you communicate; become part of our church family, or find a place to belong within our community, or discover your place on the team.

Use whatever language you would prefer and fits your culture.

The concept of belonging to a body of believers, (whether you call it membership, team, community or family, etc., is about spiritual growth, a call to maturity, and giving yourself away to others.

The foundational leadership principle that makes this work is: **You as the leader(s) give first.**

Good leaders always give first and invest more. When you model this lifestyle, the people in your congregation discover that you really do want more for them than from them.

5 ways you can invest first and invest more in those you lead:

1) Give generous amounts of spiritual encouragement and challenge.

Your primary responsibility as a leader is to provide spiritual guidance based on God's word that results in growing spiritual maturity. The person must own the process of personal growth, but as a leader, you are the champion of their growth.

2) Provide leadership development.

For all who are ready and willing, invest in their potential for leadership or increased leadership capacity.

This development is not only focused on leadership for church ministry but even more for their leadership at home and in the workplace. (. . . more for them than from them.)

3) Communicate love and concern.

Your role as spiritual shepherd is one of prayer, nurture, and care.

4) Create and offer opportunities that are not possible on their own.

The vision of your church is much larger than what any one person can do on their own. That's the beauty of team, family, and community. The "member" is part of something bigger than they are on their own.

The opportunities are many such as, being part of a grand vision, being connected in a community within a small group, biblical insights, and inspiration on Sunday, and incredible serving or global mission experiences.

In all these elements, you add value to their life by providing what an individual or family cannot create on their own.

5) Model a life of integrity and consistency.

Your character is the foundation not only for the principle of authentically modeling the life you teach but for the entirety of your leadership. This serves as great inspiration and encouragement for those you serve.

The consistency of your life and character paints a hopeful picture for those you lead.

Your church structure may or may not embrace a formal membership, but we all want people to find a place to belong and join the team to experience meaningful spiritual growth by pursuing God and serving others.

To this end, a membership class is a great opportunity to inspire, encourage, and breathe life into people who have already indicated interest in your church.

Let them know you love and appreciate them! Emphasize the vision and what you have to offer that helps them mature in their faith and live life to the full. (John 10:10)

Here's a practical list of the kinds of things you can focus on:

- Your culture and values – who you are.
- Your vision for the future – where you are going.

- Stories of life change – the meaning and purpose of the church.
- The value of serving – the beauty of giving yourself away.
- Opportunities for meaningful serving that are directly connected to the vision.
- The benefit of participating – the joy of sharing life with others. (Small groups)
- The power of prayer and scripture – the nature of an intimate walk with God.
- The significance of reaching the lost – the primary focus of ministry energy.

Make the class fun, serve those who attend well, and keep the energy up. Make the class a gift to the people rather than appearing only as an ask of the people.

> [Read more from Dan.](#)
