

Why Join the Church?

WHY DO WE BELIEVE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS IMPORTANT

Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, but you are members of God's very own family ... and you belong in God's household with every other Christian. Eph. 2:19 (LB)

Today, a lot of Christians are what I call "floating believers." It is an expression of America's rampant individualism. Anywhere else in the world, being a believer is synonymous with being connected to a local body of believers. You rarely find a lone ranger Christian in other countries.

Many American Christians, however, hop from one church to another without any identity, accountability, or commitment. They have not been taught that the Christian life involves more than just believing – it also includes belonging. We grow in Christ by being in relationship to other Christians.

C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay on church membership, reminding us that the word "membership" is of Christian origin, but it has been taken over by the world and emptied of all its original meaning.

Today, most people associate the term "membership" with paying dues, meaningless rituals, silly rules and handshakes, and having your name on some dusty roll.

Paul, however, had a very different image of membership. To Paul, being a "member" of the church did not refer to some cold induction into an institution but rather it meant becoming a vital organ of a living body (Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians. 6:15, 1 Corinthians. 12:12-27). We need to reclaim this image!

The meaning of membership

Joining a church used to be an act of conformity in our society. You joined a church because everybody else did. Now the rules have changed and conformity is no longer a motivating factor. In fact, George Gallup has found that the vast majority of Americans believe it is possible to be a "good Christian" without joining (or even attending) a local church.

Membership is now an act of commitment. The way you motivate people to join today is to show them value-for-value what benefits are in return for their commitment.

At WNCC, we've found that when people understand the meaning and value membership, they get excited about it.

There are numerous benefits to membership:

1. It identifies me as a genuine believer (Ephesians 2:19, Romans 12:5)
2. It provides a spiritual family to support and encourage me in my walk with Christ (Galatians 6:1-2, Hebrews 10:24-25)
3. It gives me a place to discover and use my gifts in ministry (1 Corinthians 12:4-27)
4. It places me under the spiritual protection of godly leaders (Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20:28-29)
5. It gives me the accountability I need to grow (Ephesians 5:21)

Nothing helps this picture come into focus like personalizing the purposes of the church. This is especially important when convincing attendees in your crowd to join your congregation.

You need to emphasize the fact that the church provides them with benefits they cannot find anywhere else in the world:

- Worship helps me focus on God. It prepares me spiritually and emotionally for the week ahead.
- Fellowship helps me face life's problems by providing the support and encouragement of other Christians.
- Discipleship helps me fortify my faith by learning the truth of God's Word and applying biblical principles to my lifestyle.
- Ministry helps me find and develop my talents and use them in serving others.
- Evangelism helps me fulfill my mission of reaching my friends and family for Christ.

Your church is a family

There are many analogies for a Christian disconnected from a church: A football player without a team; a soldier without a platoon; a tuba player without an orchestra; and a sheep without a flock.

But the most understandable (and biblical) picture is that of a child without a family.

1 Timothy 3:15 refers to the church as "... the family of God. That family is the church of the living God, the support and foundation of the truth." (LB)

God does not want his children growing up in isolation from each other so he created a spiritual family on Earth for us. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:19 "... you are members of God's very own family ... and you belong in God's household with every other Christian." (LB)

A Christian without a church family is an orphan.

I believe it is important today to position the church as a family, rather than as an institution. Since the 1960s, Americans have become increasingly anti-institutional. They use the phrase "organized religion" with contempt.

On the other hand, people are longing for a sense of family and community.

Today, there are a number of factors that have fragmented the nuclear family in our culture: The high divorce rate, delayed marriages, the emphasis on individuality, alternative lifestyles, women working outside the home, and the high rate of mobility.

In our mobile society, people have few roots. People are no longer surrounded by the extended family of aunts and uncles, grandparents, and brothers and sisters that provided a safety net for previous generations.

The longing to belong

Today, we have a record number of single adults in America. Vance Packard calls America, “a nation of strangers.” As a result, we’re experiencing an epidemic of loneliness in society. One Gallup poll reported that four in 10 Americans admit to frequent feelings of “intense loneliness.” Americans are, in fact, the loneliest people in the world.

Everywhere you look there are signs that people have a deep hunger for fellowship, community, and a sense of family. Beer commercials don’t sell beer – they sell fellowship. They never portray anyone drinking alone. It’s always in the context of people enjoying each other’s company with phrases like – “It doesn’t get any better than this!”

Independent-minded baby boomers are suddenly longing to be connected as they enter middle age.

This longing for belonging provides the church with a timely opportunity. Positioning the church as an extended family – and as “a place where you are cared for” – will strike a sensitive cord in many lonely hearts.