

Church Membership

All people born again of the Spirit of God are incorporated into the Body of Christ - the church. The outward expression of this transformed life should come through a commitment to the local church.

Traditional denominations tend to formalise church membership while some other denominations and streams have more of a loose concept of membership. George Barna in his book 'User Friendly Churches', points out that membership has largely lost its meaning today. For example, people may now be very committed to a church, but refuse to become members. Unfortunately there are also many people around who will never commit themselves to one church for long, but shift regularly from one church to another depending on *which church meets their needs*. Tragic!

Scripture is strong on not independence, but interdependence. Membership helps to restore the importance of interdependence. Unfortunately some local non Christian clubs require a greater degree of commitment from their members than some churches do.

Having pastored in three denominations where all believe in the importance of church commitment, but differ in the way it is accomplished, it is obvious that no one form of membership has all the answers. All types are open to abuse. Here are some of the different ways in which churches practise church membership.

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1. *Formal membership.* To qualify for membership in this structure a person is required to attend a series of instruction classes where certain doctrines which are important to the life of the church are taught. In churches where a person is not required to attend such a formal class of instruction, they instead normally have an interview by two leaders to ascertain their level of understanding and commitment to the church. The recommendation for their acceptance as members often goes to a membership meeting of the church for approval. Once given, they are then welcomed into the church during a church service on a Sunday. Normally, they sign a membership register to record the event. Now as members they have the right to vote at church membership meetings, whereas before they were only eligible to attend, perhaps take part in the discussion, but never vote.
2. *Loose membership structure.* A person becomes a member if they are in a tangible way committed to a church. It will certainly include regular attendance of a Sunday service to say the least. Normally they will have an involvement in some form of ministry, just like the above group. Outwardly their membership is endorsed by having their name included on the telephone directory.
3. *Combination of the above.* The difference in the procedure here is that these people coming into membership will be invited to come down the front during a

church service and the pastor or another leader will formally welcome them into membership by shaking their hands and praying over them. They may have had a formal interview about membership, but more than likely not.

Whatever form of membership you adopt consider the following and remember that most approaches are open to abuse.

Points to note

- A more formal approach lends itself to legalism, where people can become more concerned with procedure rather than the spirit of intent.
- A more formal approach may give emphasis to a numbers game where unhealthy pressure is placed upon leadership, or if things are going well there is the temptation for pride.
- A more open ended approach may create an easy come and easy go attitude lessening the importance of commitment.
- A loving trusting attitude within the church can never be legislated. People can only experience this as Jesus Christ is Lord. This will affect their relationships in a significant way.

Notes