

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.

‘And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another —and all the more as you see the Day approaching’ (Hebrews 10:24,25).

Traditional denominations tend to formalise church membership while some other denominations and churches 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. That's very sad! Scripture is strong on not independence, but interdependence. Membership helps to restore the importance of interdependence.

My experience across three denominations, each affirming the importance of church commitment but implementing it differently, suggests that no single membership model is desirable in every context.

1. **Formal membership.** Under this structure, a person usually qualifies for membership by attending a series of instructional classes that teach doctrines and practice considered important to the church's life. In another approach, believers are not required to attend formal classes but are interviewed by two leaders to assess their understanding and commitment to the church. In both cases, a recommendation for membership is often brought to a church membership meeting for approval. Once approved, the person is welcomed into the local church during a Sunday service, and their names are recorded in a membership register. As members, they may vote at church membership meetings; before membership, they may attend and perhaps contribute to discussion, but they are not eligible to vote.
2. **Loose membership structure.** A person is regarded as a member when they show clear, practical commitment to the church. At a minimum, this includes regular attendance at Sunday services. It will often also involve serving in a ministry and perhaps participating in a home group. Their membership is usually recognised outwardly by including their name in the church 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.

Whichever membership model you choose, keep the following points in mind, recognising that every approach can be misused.

Points to note

1. A more formal approach lends itself to legalism, where people can become more concerned with procedure rather than the spirit of intent.
2. A more open-ended approach may create an easy come and easy go attitude lessening the importance of commitment.
3. 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.