

Church Membership: Re-imagining Church Membership for a Renewed Church

A Mission Northwest White Paper
Dr. Charles Revis, Executive Minister

As churches journey through our current post-Christendom era the role of church membership is shifting, at least, among churches that hold to congregational governance. By congregational governance I mean the organizational system where ultimate authority within the church resides with its members. However, this system does not preclude the pastor, staff and the board from directing day-to-day ministries and operations as commissioned by the congregaton¹.

Due to bad experiences with congregational governance and unhealthy membership behavior some churches have jettisoned church membership all together. These churches have shifted final authority to a church board, often called the elders. They no longer have church membership, and thus, no congregational voting mechanism. Among Baptist churches this is a departure from congregational ecclesiology as it has been practiced historically. Since final authority rests solely with the board, church attenders have no formalized say in the church's operations, or, little recourse when leadership transgresses legal and/or ethical boundaries².

Some churches have dropped church membership because they fail to find scriptural support for the practice in their interpretation of the Bible. (I personally find this to be a weak argument in light of texts that say things like: "we are all members of one body" Eph 4:24, Rom 12:4.)

Others have dropped membership due to abuses of membership "rights and privileges" by certain church members. Membership becomes an opportunity for wielding self-centered influence without regard to the rancor such power plays create in the congregation. The result has been churches removing membership, and thus voiding congregational authority as a means towards avoiding membership abuses.

By contrast other churches have doubled down on church membership by deepening and strengthening the role of membership in the church's life. These churches make an intentional connection between mature membership and the effectiveness of the congregation. They believe that healthy members make a healthy church. They raise the bar for membership by increasing membership expectations. Membership and its responsibilities are taken seriously as an important tool for developing disciples.

Churches that have enhanced membership requirements encourage congregational participants to move from merely attending church to “joining the team”, so to speak³. Membership is a pledge of active support for the church’s mission and engagement in its ministries. Such churches monitor membership involvement in real time encouraging members to remain active. They require members to comply with clearly enumerated and reinforced membership expectations.

Churches that have raised membership expectations are usually growing churches. Their view of church membership reflects their focused commitment on making and growing disciples. This is in contrast with many declining churches that keep membership expectations low allowing members to disengage over time while retaining their names on membership rolls.

Sifting through the various pros and cons I believe church membership holds the potential to play a number of vital roles in today’s churches. Developing members as committed disciples of Jesus Christ is an important key in revitalizing the church. Yet, to cultivate a healthy practice of membership churches need to re-imagine membership. Expectations for members need to be refreshed and reinforced. Membership should involve an annual re-commitment to the church and its mission. At the least, a re-imagined membership calls for a solemn, ongoing, active commitment by members to enter into a covenantal partnership with the congregation as a whole.

Before laying out a scheme for a re-imagined membership I wish to highlight unhealthy concepts of membership that periodically plague churches. These examples of poor membership practices need to be called out and rectified in churches where members have abused their membership roles.

1. Permanent life-long church membership. In too many churches once a name is added to the membership roster there is almost no acceptable way to remove it. A member may have moved to a distant city many years past with no current involvement in the church (even through online streaming). Yet, because their name is still on the roll the member can be recruited to show up at a congregational meeting to cast his/her vote if a controversy arises. This concept of “once a member always a member” runs counter to the biblical view of the church as a living and active body composed of contributing members who put their spiritual gift(s) into play within the body (see 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12: 3-8, Ephesians 4: 7-13).

Permanent church membership, regardless of lack of engagement, is an unhealthy practice. Active membership should be the goal. A clear system should be in place to

move inactive members off the membership roster. Furthermore, it's a wise practice to limit voting privileges only to active membership.

2. Consumer view of church membership. With this unhealthy practice church membership is based more on the idea of belonging to the Rotary, the Country Club or the “Jelly-of-the Month Club”. Church members pay dues (token giving), receive goods and services (from the pastor and/or staff) and reserve the right to critique services rendered. The pastor is treated as a hireling and must bow to the wishes of individual members. This is a contractual, quid pro quo, arrangement between members and the ecclesial organization that has no correlation with a New Testament concept of the church. This unhealthy practice must also be rooted out of churches.

3. Church membership as a democratic right. Just as the U.S. government gives every citizen the right to vote, with this unhealthy view every member has the right to vote their conscience and exert their influence within the congregation from a solely individualistic perspective. This leads to a view of the church as merely a collection of individuals whose personal wishes are deemed greater than the body as a whole. By contrast, in healthy churches members pray, listen and work together to discern what is best for the congregation as a whole. The unity and health of the body overrides individual preferences. This attitude of submitting to the good of the whole is especially important for churches to successfully unify around the primary purpose of furthering the Gospel within its surrounding community.

4. Church membership as fight club privileges. This unhealthy view takes the “church member has democratic rights” to a toxic level. Church meetings are envisioned as a place for various factions to assert their will on the body collective. Members can now enter the fray, line up politically with various church parties and assert their influence through voting. Church meetings become political sparring matches.⁴ This is one of the primary reasons some churches have dropped church membership. Who needs the hassle, right?

These damaging church membership practices are at odds with the biblical view of a Christ-centered body of believers in which members submit first to Christ as the Head, and then to one another as brothers and sisters (Eph 5:21, 1 Pet 5:5). Yet, these unhealthy attitudes and practices have crept into congregational life corrupting the meaning of church membership in all too many churches. This is why I am advocating for a re-imagined church membership.

A Re-imagined Church Membership

As I've said previously in this paper I believe there continues to be a vital purpose for healthy church membership and appropriately exercised congregational authority. Yet, I will be the first to say that church membership needs to be re-calibrated in order to avoid the potential abuses that all too often attend membership and congregational authority.

I offer the following adjustments to our practices of church membership so that church membership once again contributes to the maintenance and nurturing of a healthy church life, fosters mature discipleship, and insures the wielding of appropriate congregational authority.

1. Recover the expectation of a REGENERATE Church membership. I often wonder if certain "church members" in conflicted churches have submitted their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Their behaviors and attitudes belie their confession of faith, or lack thereof.

Many Baptist churches have a statement in their confession of faith (or membership requirements) stating belief in a "regenerate church membership". I fear that some members have misheard this as a directive to become a "degenerate church member". Hah.

All kidding aside, we would be wise to recover the practice of only receiving into membership Christ-followers who give evidence of having given over their lives to Jesus as King. We should expect a clear, unequivocal testimony from prospective church members of having been "born again", the literal meaning of "regenerate" (Romans 10:9). I acknowledge this may indicate an expectation of being able to cite a date and time when a person gave their life to Christ. This is not my intention. Some people come to faith as a process that unfolds over an extended time period. Others experience a sudden "Damascus Road" conversion. What I am advocating here is the ability of the prospective member to assure others through their faith story they have entered into a relationship with Jesus, submitting their lives to Him as their Savior and Lord. Preparing prospective members to tell their faith story can be an important aspect in discipling new participants into church membership.

When I was a pastor my church did its best to insure church members had truly encountered Christ. We asked prospective members to share their conversion story before the church board. If doing so before the board was too intimidating we asked

them to share their faith in an interview with a staff member and a board member. Additionally, every member was required to have been baptized.

These practices reinforced the most important requirement for church membership: evidence of being a regenerated, disciple of Jesus Christ.

2. Practice ENGAGED Church Membership. We would be wise to recover the concept of church membership as a pledge of active engagement with the congregation as a contributing, participating member.

This means cultivating a stance among members of “giving more than receiving” (Acts 20:35). Many of the problems with church membership today stems from the influence of consumerism resulting in an attitude in which certain self-centered members demand to know “what has the church done for me lately?” Healthy members keep their “receiving” expectations low while finding ways to “give” to the body.

From an individual believer’s perspective church membership is the means through which a person says, “I am committed to this particular church and I will invest my time, talent, treasure and energies for the good of this body and its mission”. Engaged members close ranks with other members to assist the church in attaining its God-directed mission of making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19, Acts 1:8).

Additionally, membership should include the willingness to be developed as a disciple through congregational involvement. This requires a growth stance, recognizing that each of us is in process, and on any given day we must be willing to adjust our thinking and behavior in light of what we are learning through our church engagement.

From the church’s organizational perspective church membership is the mechanism for determining who is on board with the church’s mission, convictions, culture and strategies. In other words, membership is a means for knowing who can be counted on to give of their time and talent so that the church may succeed in its mission. These invested “partners” in the church’s mission are those who are given the privilege and responsibility to discern together the overall direction of the church and hold its leaders accountable.

3. Clarify and reinforce member EXPECTATIONS. To help encourage engaged church membership churches should clarify expectations of church members. These may be stated in the form of a covenant listing minimal expectations⁵. The emphasis should

be on actions that contribute to the good of the body as a whole. There should be no disengaged members. Every member, including home-bound and disabled members, can find ways to contribute to the good of their church family.

Some suggested covenantal expectations may include the following practices:

- Praying for and supporting the pastor, staff and leadership
- Volunteering and/or leading in a church ministry
- Regular attendance at worship services
- Contributing financially
- Actively striving for church unity
- Exercising Christian virtues that contribute to a healthy church culture
- Willingness to be mentored and/or disciplined by more mature members

At one time church covenants were an integral part of fostering a healthy congregation. I recommend that churches write new covenants and ask members to pledge to uphold them as a means towards raising the bar of church membership expectations.

Furthermore, every church should offer a new member class to teach these expectations in depth. A periodic membership class affords ample opportunity to explore the full meaning of church membership and reinforce membership expectations.

Pastors may reinforce membership expectations through a sermon series covering the expectations, embedding stories of members living out the expectations in inspiring ways in sermons, and producing video stories highlighting members serving the congregation and community.

4. Limit church membership to a ONE-YEAR RENEWABLE COVENANT. A practical method for insuring an engaged and active membership is the requirement of an annual renewal of the membership covenant. This means scheduling an annual Covenant Sunday when all members gather to renew their covenant with the rest of the body.

Every member that fails to renew the covenant—after sufficient time and effort has been given for renewal—should be moved to an inactive list. Likewise if a member has not attended and/or contributed financially to the church in the prior 12-months they should be moved to an inactive list. Voting privileges should be revoked at the time an inactive member is moved to the inactive list. The church should actively

attempt to re-engage inactive members during the next 6 months. If after 6 months they remain inactive their name should be dropped from the church roll.

At the same time, pastors should refrain from using this process to displace church members with whom they struggle or are in conflict. Every effort should be made by congregants, leadership and the pastor to resolve differences, be reconciled one to another and guard the unity of the church. Expelling members as a tactic for securing the pastor's power should be off limits in any congregation.

Names of prior members now inactive may be kept on a historical list of previous church members. However, it should be clarified that having one's name on this list carries with it no authority or say in the current congregation's affairs.

5. Identify and clarify the LEGAL dimensions of church membership. Another important issue is related to church membership and legal matters. Individual states require churches to register as non-profit corporations.

If a church is organized with church members (which applies to most Baptist churches) who are given the right to vote there are legal guidelines that come into play as dictated by the non-profit laws of that particular state. A church's bylaws must be in alignment with the state's requirements in this respect. Once adopted by the congregation, bylaws governing church membership must be followed as closely as possible.

Active church membership should also include a basic understanding that a church member agrees with the church's essential beliefs, mission, vision, values, strategies and culture. Along with this should be the stated expectation that if a member can no longer agree with these then that person should resign their membership from the church. It should also be clarified that membership carries with it willingness to be held accountable by the leadership to Christ-like ethics and morality.

Once again, these expectations, although not legal in nature, should be delineated in the church's bylaws. Church members when assembled in a congregational meeting exercise collective authority and provide accountability for the church's organizational life. Typically Baptist congregations vote upon these matters:

- Call of the lead pastor
- Dismissal of the pastor
- Appointment of board members
- Removal of board members

- Adopting and/or amending bylaws
- Purchasing real property
- Dissolving the church
- Distribution of assets.
- Assuming debt (loans, mortgages, etc.).
- Many churches also vote on the annual budget (although I recommend doing so in broad categories rather than in the form of a detailed itemized budget)

I believe that it is wise for the church board to be accountable to the congregation. The importance of having this line of accountability has come into bold relief as more high-profile pastors have abused their authority and church boards have failed to hold abusive pastors accountable⁶.

The church should review its bylaws and policies at least every three years to insure they remain legally current.

6. Train church members to REPRESENT the body collective. The witness and lifestyle of church members reflect for good, or for bad, the church in the world and in the local community. An important aspect of re-imagining church membership involves lifting up the responsibility of all church members to self-monitor their behavior so as to not to bring disrepute to the congregation.

7. Lift up the DISCERNMENT responsibility of church membership. One of the mistakes churches have made is allowing congregational meetings to devolve into political tussles as highlighted earlier in this paper. This reflects American political processes rather than the practices we witness in the New Testament. Congregations should make every effort to avoid behaving like a secular political body.

Meetings should not be occasions for assuming a “fight club” mentality. Paul warns against church divisions in 1 Cor. 1:10-15 and against meetings that do more harm than good in 1 Cor. 11:17-19. Rather the congregation should enter into meetings as a Christ-minded body with an awareness that Jesus (the Head of the Body) and the Holy Spirit (divine counselor) are present imparting guidance through the congregation’s deliberations. Christ-like love, peace and joy along with a spirit of mutual submission should permeate all congregational meetings

With this in mind when the congregation is assembled to deliberate on important matters it is important to emphasize the practice of spiritual discernment.⁷ Meetings should be conducted in a worshipful and prayerful manner. Most importantly, every

member should listen carefully to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the congregation as it engages in discernment together.

In light of this, voting should be the mechanism for registering the direction members sense the Holy Spirit is leading the congregation as a whole. Voting should not reflect mere personal preferences. There will be occasions when a member will by necessity put aside his, or her, personal preference in order to affirm the majority opinion of the congregation as it discerns collectively the leading of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

Conclusion

Church life, as wonderful as it can be, can likewise be frustrating and disappointing, especially when members misbehave. We all have our stories to tell and the scars that remind us of them. However, membership misbehavior is an insufficient reason for jettisoning the practice of church membership. Neither is the current movement among some to elevate a church board above the collective body by depowering the congregation through elimination of church membership and congregational meetings the best approach.

Rather I am optimistic that a re-imagined membership is a viable pathway for maturing disciples, which in turn holds promised for a renewed and invigorated church.

I encourage you and your church to raise the value of church membership. Dust off your understanding of membership. Refresh your practices. Raise your expectations. Create a culture of membership health and vitality with a prayerful expectation that the result will be a more like Christ-like congregation.

Endnotes

¹ Mission Northwest recommends churches adopt an Accountable Governance system as an improvement over the traditional multi-board, multi-committee structure that has its origins in the late 1940s. Accountable Governance assigns roles to the pastor (leader), board (governance), staff (management) and congregational members (ministers). The system provides simplicity and flexibility while creating appropriate lines of accountability. Ultimate authority resides with the congregation. However the congregation does not manage or direct daily operations. Contact Mission Northwest staff for more information and a suggested “Boiler Plate Church Bylaws” based on the Accountable Governance model. We also provide training for implementing the accountable governance model.

² There is a current movement towards “Elder Led” churches sweeping across the U.S. This transition to a centralized board of 4 to 7 elders, inclusive of the pastor, is touted as the true biblical model of church governance. It is questionable whether there is enough information in the scriptures to proscribe one form of church governance as superior above others especially in light of the fact that the N.T. hints at a variety of church governance systems. Howard Snyder, a Methodist, wrote in his book *Community of the King*, "The Bible gives very little specific guidance regarding church structure. . . On the basis of this biblical witness the Church in every age forms those wineskins which seem most compatible with its nature and mission within its cultural context." More explanation of this view will be made available in a forthcoming article, “Baptists and Church Order.” Also, see the scholarly text: *Church Order in the New Testament* by Eduard Schweizer which argues that one can find a variety of emerging organizational systems in the N.T.

³ See *Church Is a Team Sport* by Jim Putman as an example of one congregation that expects members to develop deep relational connections and engage in hands-on ministry for the purpose of maximizing the congregation’s impact and witness.

⁴ Note Paul’s strong warning against such behavior in the church in Romans 16:17-18a (NIV): *And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people’s faith by teaching things contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them. Such people are not serving Christ our Lord; they are serving their own personal interests.*

⁵ Baptists have historically covenanted with one another for the good of the whole. Over time these covenants added more and more legalistic elements eventually falling out of use in part because they were too restrictive. Recovering the concept and practice of covenants would help reinforce a healthy church culture along with healthy concepts of membership. My previous congregation embraced the following simple church covenant borrowed and adapted from Saddleback Church.

University Baptist Church Membership Covenant

Having received Christ as my Lord and Savior and been baptized, and being in agreement with UBC’s statements, strategy, and structure, I now feel led by the Holy Spirit to unite with the church family at UBC. In doing so, I commit myself to God and to the other members of UBC. With God’s help I will do my best to live out the following commitments:

1. I will protect the unity of my church

... by acting in love toward other members

... by refusing to gossip

... by following the church’s leaders

“So let us concentrate on the things which make for harmony, and on the growth of our fellowship together” (Rom 14:19).

“Have a sincere love for other believers, love one another earnestly with all your heart” (1 Pet 1:22).

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs” (Eph 4:29).

“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be no advantage to you” (Heb 13:17).

2. I will share the responsibility of my church

... by praying for its health and growth

... by inviting the unchurched to attend

... by warmly welcoming those who visit

“To the church . . . We always thank God for you and pray for you constantly” (1 Thess 1:1-2).

“The Master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes, and urge the people there to come so my house will be full’ (Luke 14:23).

“So, warmly welcome each other into the church, just as Christ has warmly welcomed you; then God will be glorified” (Rom 15:7).

3. I will serve the ministry of my church

... by discovering my gifts and talents

... by being equipped to serve by my pastor, the staff and leaders

... by developing a servant's heart

“Serve one another with the particular gifts God has given each of you” (1 Peter 4:10).

“[The Holy Spirit] gave . . . some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11-12).

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who . . . [took on] the very nature of a servant” (Phil 2:3-4, 7).

4. I will contribute to the vitality and the testimony of my church

... by attending faithfully

... by living a godly life

... by giving regularly

“Let us not give up meeting together . . . but let us encourage one another” (Heb 10:25).

“Whatever happens, make sure that your everyday life is worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27).

“Each one of you, on the first day of each week, should set aside a specific sum of money in proportion to what you have earned and use it for the offering” (1 Cor 16:2).

“A tenth of [all your] produce . . . is the Lord’s, and is holy” (Lev 27:30).

⁶ For more information on this issue see *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* by Scot McKnight and Laura Beringer

⁷ An outstanding resource for recovering discernment within church meetings is Ruth Haley Barton’s book, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*.