

Church membership covenant: Expect what the Bible expects

by Rick Warren

Why do churches have so many people on their membership rolls who give little or no evidence of Christian commitment or even conversion? Why do many churches find it difficult to motivate members to give, serve, pray and share their faith? The answer is simple. The members were allowed to join with no expectations placed on them.

You get what you ask for!

The difference between attenders and members can be summed up in one word: commitment. It's like the difference between couples who just "live together" and those who get married. While becoming a Christian means to commit yourself to Christ, becoming a church member means to commit yourself to other Christians. It is a commitment to a specific group of believers - to practice the "one-another"s of the New Testament.

"Today, most churches are silent about developing that level of commitment to each other."

Paul mentions two different types of commitment in 2 Corinthians 8:5: "First they gave themselves to the Lord; and then, by God's will, they gave themselves to us as well" (GN). At Saddleback, we call these the first-base commitments. You commit yourself to Christ for salvation and then you commit yourself to other Christians for membership in our church family.

In our church we define koinonia (fellowship) as "being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ."

Jesus said that our love for each other was to be the mark of discipleship (John 13:33-34).

I believe it's an indictment of American Christianity that most believers can quote John 3:16 but they can't quote 1 John 3:16: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." When was the last time you heard a message on this verse? Today, most churches are silent about developing that level of commitment to each other.

The phrase "one another" or "each other" is used more than 50 times in the New Testament. We are commanded to love each other, pray for each other, encourage each other, admonish each other, greet each other, serve each other, teach each other, accept each other, honor each other, bear each other's burdens, forgive each other, sing to each other, submit to each other and be devoted to each other. All of these commands are what membership in a local body of believers is all about. These are the responsibilities of membership.

At Saddleback, we only expect of our members what the Bible clearly expects of all believers. These expectations are summarized in our Membership Covenant.

The most important part of a marriage ceremony is when the man and woman exchange vows. Before witnesses and God, they make certain promises to each other. This covenant between them is the essence of the marriage. In the same way, I believe the essence of church membership is contained in the willingness to commit to a membership covenant. It is the most important element of our membership class.

Throughout the Bible and church history, spiritual covenants have been made between people in order for mutual edification and accountability.

At Saddleback we have four requirements for membership:

- 1) A personal profession of Christ as Lord and Savior.
- 2) Baptism by immersion as a public symbol of one's faith.
- 3) Completion of the membership class.
- 4) A signed commitment to abide by Saddleback's membership covenant.

I urge you to prayerfully prepare and adopt a membership covenant in your congregation if you don't have one. It can revolutionize your church. You may worry, "If we adopt a membership covenant, there will be some who leave our church over it." You're right. There will be some. But here is the fact of reality: People are going to leave your church no matter what you do. Don't be afraid of people leaving. People even walked away from Jesus. When your congregation adopts a membership covenant, at least you're choosing the kind of people who stay.

Here is a copy of our membership covenant:

The Saddleback Membership Covenant

Having received Christ as my Lord and Savior and been baptized, and being in agreement with Saddleback's statements, strategy, and structure, I now feel led by the Holy Spirit to unite with the Saddleback church family. In doing so, I commit myself to God and to the other members to do the following:

1. I WILL PROTECT THE UNITY OF MY CHURCH

...By acting in love toward other members

...By refusing to gossip

...By following the leaders

"So let us concentrate on the things which make for harmony, and on the growth of our fellowship together." Rom. 15:19 (Ph)

"Have a sincere love for your fellow believers, love one another earnestly with all your hearts." 1 Peter 1:22 (TEV)

"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 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. 1:2

"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 (NCV)

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

3. I WILL SERVE THE MINISTRY OF MY CHURCH

...By discovering my gifts and talents

...By being equipped to serve by my pastors

...By developing a servant's heart

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

"God gave...some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of ministry, 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 Jesus Christ...who took on the very nature of a servant..." Phil. 2:3-4,7

4. I WILL SUPPORT THE TESTIMONY OF MY CHURCH

...By attending faithfully

...By living a godly life

...By giving regularly

"Let us not give up the habit of meeting together...but let us encourage one another." Heb. 10:25

"But whatever happens, make sure that your everyday life is worthy of the gospel of Christ." Phil. 1:27 (Ph)

"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 it is holy." Lev. 27:30