



SEVEN TRENDS IN CHURCH NEW MEMBER CLASSES

November 16, 2013 by Thom Rainer

One of the most significant changes in church practices in the past fifteen years is the requirement of an entry class to be granted church membership. In a 1997 survey I did, only 17 percent of churches were requiring a new member class. In a recent and non-scientific Twitter poll I conducted, 86 percent of those who responded said their church requires a membership class to be formally affiliated with the church.

Even if you provide allowances for the potential lack of accuracy of a Twitter poll, the change is remarkable if not dramatic. The number of churches requiring a membership class has increased 400 percent in 15 years!

That is one of seven key trends we see today in new member classes. Let's look at all seven:

1. **Requiring church membership classes has become a normative church practice.** Indeed this church practice is almost as pervasive as churches that have small groups or Sunday school classes.
2. **The longer a church has required a membership class, the shorter it becomes in length.** Many churches start with membership classes that are multiple weeks in length. Because of teaching efficiency and the need for better participation, they typically move toward one-day classes.
3. **The most common length of a new member class is three hours.** Of course, there is a wide variety of lengths and days of these classes, but the three-hour class is now the plurality among those offered. It still is a long way from becoming the majority preference though.
4. **The most common day the class is offered is Sunday.** The logic behind this option is that people are already at church, so offer the class while they are there. I have heard from many church leaders whose churches offer the class during the Sunday school/Bible study/small group time. Others offer the class immediately after the worship services, typically connected to

- lunch. Again, there is still much variety on the day or evening these classes are offered.
5. **The most efficient membership classes have options.** By efficient, I mean the level of participation. If the church offers classes at different times, more people are likely to participate. A common example is a church that offers a class on two Wednesday evenings for 90 minutes each, *or* one Sunday afternoon for three hours.
 6. **Among the minority of churches that do not require new member classes, there are strong feelings against them.** Some church leaders and members view such a requirement as legalistic and/or unbiblical. This issue still evokes strong emotions.
 7. **Leaders in churches are enthusiastic about the benefits of new member classes.** Though I have no metrics, I do hear anecdotal testimonies about improved member retention, better stewardship, stronger ministry participation, and lower conflict.