

MEMBERS OF THE BODY

What does church membership mean today?¹



The meaning of church membership has become difficult to define today. Part of this is because we are no longer a society of 'joiners.' Every kind of voluntary organization, including churches, has experienced a significant decline in membership in the last 40-50 years. There has also been a decline in how active members are in the life of churches, with many continuing to consider themselves members even if they rarely attend worship or take part in the life of the congregation.

Some have suggested that the number of people in worship may offer a more accurate way to assess church participation than names on a membership roll. While gathering with others for worship is central to the life of a Christian church, this raises other important questions about whether worship attendance alone should be viewed as the defining activity for being an active member of the church.

This is a very practical question. After all, every congregation is invited to wrestle with this question whenever newcomers, upon being asked if they are interested in joining the community, respond with the obvious question – “maybe ... but what does it mean to become a member of the church?”

Members in the Body of Christ

A good place to start is the Scripture that gives us the language of membership in the first place. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... Now together you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27)

The Apostle Paul stressed the image of the body and its members (or parts) to the Christians in Corinth to encourage unity, love, respect and mutual support in the church: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26)

The image of the body also serves as a reminder that as Christians we do not exist for our own individual spiritual growth but together we form the only physical body Jesus continues to have in this world. Each member then has their own unique role in the body of Christ: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function... We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” (Romans 12:4-6) This means members have a purpose outside of ourselves and our own needs.

So, with this as our foundation for thinking about being members in the Body of Christ let's consider three ways of looking membership in the local church.

¹ The following is inspired and adapted from an article entitled “Members for Eternity,” by Will Ingram and Matthew Ruttan in the March 2011 issue of the *Presbyterian Record* pages 32-25.
<https://presbyterianarchives.ca/the-presbyterian-record/>

Membership as Belonging

One of the most common images used to understand membership in a church is that of belonging or being a part of a family. While there are limitations to this image of the church as a family – not least in the fact that many congregations are as dysfunctional as many families – there are important strengths to this link between membership and belonging.

This kind of image implies an intentional commitment to others and helps challenge the dominant consumerist approach to church participation and spirituality. In a time when many people go ‘church shopping’ with the unconscious assumption that choosing a church is just a matter of finding a place that meets our wants and needs, the decision to become a member of a community reflects a willingness to commit oneself to share in the joys, the celebrations, and the struggles of life together – not simply for the sake of the benefits that one will receive.

This idea of membership as belonging also reflects the deeper spiritual reality of membership as a way of affirming one’s identity as an integral part of the body of Christ through baptism. *Living Faith*² reflects this dimension of membership in its statement that, “Those baptized in infancy are called in later years to make personal profession of Christ.” While a baptized person without formal membership in a congregation is still a part of the body of Christ, the decision to become a member of a congregation reflects their desire to make a public profession of their spiritual identity.

Membership as Partnership in Mission and Ministry

A second reason to consider membership is a desire to become a partner in the mission and ministry of a particular congregation. Such an understanding of membership reflects a desire to dedicate one’s gifts, resources, time, attention and energy to the ministry of a local faith community in a particular space and time. This definition makes it clear that membership is more than just showing up for an hour on Sunday morning!

While God is not confined to the church, the concept of encountering God in nature or on the golf course is not a substitute for full engagement with a church community. This sort of perspective shows a limited awareness that the calling of Christ is meant to draw us into relationship with others, and into communities in which there is a shared ministry of compassion and praise, service and prayer.

This concept of membership as partnership also has clear implications for church leaders. That is, if membership is viewed as partnership in mission and ministry, it is essential for congregations to clearly define the specific nature of their ministry, and to offer ways for individuals to use their gifts in the service of that mission. It’s good to say, “We love God and our neighbours,” but it’s necessary for the congregation to prayerfully work out how they can enable every member to have role in putting that into practice.

² The most recent of the three Confessions (statements of faith) held by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. You can borrow this small green book from the pews or go to: <https://presbyterian.ca/about/more/>

Membership as a Resource for Christian Discipleship

In a time when organized religion is often viewed as quite different from the concept of 'spirituality,' it's important to consider how active membership in a church can and should lead to a greater spiritual growth and commitment. In some ways, this may be the most overlooked dimension of membership – that it can be an essential resource for a more passionate and dedicated life of Christian discipleship (following Jesus and becoming more like Jesus).

A practical outcome of this concept is that if congregations are to become more effective resources for discipleship, it will be necessary to move from an understanding of active church participation as membership in a social club towards the idea of discipleship in a spiritual community. The strength that can come from life in such a spiritual community was reflected in the comment of one person who stated, in response to the question why he became a member, "Because I can't follow Jesus alone; it's too hard."

This kind of statement reflects a key part of Christian spirituality – that the Holy Spirit guides us in our journey together in community as the body of the risen and living Christ. It also serves to remind us that the church, and its membership, cannot be explained primarily in terms of human dynamics and sociology. Rather, we believe in the power and the activity of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to follow Jesus together.

As Christians in the Reformed tradition, we have also emphasised the role of Scripture in the Spirit's work of forming the church. This means, as Fred Craddock reminds us, that membership in this Spirit-led community means, "Being responsible to and being responsible for the Scriptures." When we rely on our individual understanding, we can easily be misled. But when we seek the guidance of the Scriptures together, we provide the best opportunity for the Spirit to send us in the right direction. Therefore, membership is not just about being part of a social group with a common interest: it is called by God, animated by the Holy Spirit, guided by Scripture, and living in Christ – together.

The Meaning of Membership

So, what does it mean to become a member of the church? It means that we are publicly affirming the identity we are given in baptism: people who belong to the body of Christ. It means that we are dedicating our lives to becoming partners with others in the mission and ministry of a community of faith. It means that we are embracing the gift of community as a resource for deepening our calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

At the centre of these reflections about the meaning of membership is the conviction that our relationship with Christ leads directly into relationship with other people. This conviction was beautifully articulated by the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*, in which he wrote, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. ... What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity." In other words, on our better days, our life together in the church is meant to be a taste of heaven. Which is a fairly good explanation of what membership means.