

THE MEANING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

by Susan Andrews

Meeting Our Members

- Anna is a thirty-year-old single woman who is a successful lawyer in a large metropolitan area. She lives a comfortable and busy life, but finds herself restless and unfocused much of the time. She has started attending worship at a local Presbyterian Church, drifting back to the congregation where she was confirmed fifteen years earlier. She is looking for something to give meaning to her life and a way to serve others beyond her small, private world.
- Doug has never attended church or found anything attractive about religion. But recently he married Beth, who is a practicing Christian, and he finds something deep and compelling about her life of faith. He has started reading the Bible and exploring theological ideas, and finds himself opening up to the presence of God through the weekly ritual of worship. Doug feels drawn to Jesus Christ and yearns to make a commitment. But he still has intellectual doubts about some of the traditional doctrines of the faith.
- Sheila is married to Don, an Air Force officer who moves around every two or three years. Such constant mobility is hard on the family, but Sheila has learned that the church welcomes her wherever she goes. Her faith is strong and simple and nourishing, and she quickly finds a congregation in each new community where her gifts and talents are warmly welcomed.

Anna, Doug, and Sheila represent different kinds of members in our congregations today—approaching church membership from a variety of places on their spiritual journeys. Anna will join a church by reaffirmation of faith—returning to an active life of faith after a long period of inactivity. Doug will make a profession of faith—claiming Jesus as Lord for the first time in his life, not out of intellectual certainty but out of a heart yearning for a personal relationship with God. And Sheila will join by transfer of letter—easily moving from one community of faith to another, finding a common story and a spiritual family wherever she goes.

The Three C's of Church Membership

There are three central values or ideas that shape our understanding of church membership:

1. **Covenant.** As with all aspects of the Christian life, church membership begins with God—with God's covenant made with each one of us through baptism. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, God says to us, "I will be your God and you will be my people—no matter what." And God fulfills this covenant promise again and again by forgiving us and re-creating us and encouraging us through all the failures and all the struggles and all the perplexities of life. The ultimate expression of God's tenacity and love for us comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—where God's Word becomes flesh and dwells among us—taking every moment of human living and transforming it into the likeness of God. Such extraordinary love and faithfulness is the heart of God's covenant with us. And this holy covenant becomes the model for our human covenants, our human promises to be loving and faithful and constant in all the relationships of our living. Church membership is our primary covenant response to God's dependable presence in our lives.
2. **Commitment.** Just as God stays connected to us no matter what, we are called through church membership to stay connected to God faithfully, regularly, permanently—in good times and in bad. Loyalty and fidelity are becoming rare values in our fast-paced and novelty-oriented world. But it is only through long-term commitment and disciplined participation that church membership can change us and root us in what is really important. Every member of a church is a "minister"—one who serves God. And commitment is the fuel that energizes our ministry, year in and year out.
3. **Community.** In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul offers an organic image of the church. We are the body of Christ, an interconnected, interdependent, integrated community of believers, dependent on one another to make the church whole. Our covenant commitment is not just with God but with one another. And so as church members we admit our need for others and their need for us.

Conclusion

And so, becoming a church member is a commitment to a covenant relationship – a relationship with a living and risen Jesus, and a relationship with a vulnerable and growing community of faith. Or, as the Book of Order says: “One becomes an active member of the church through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life.” (G-5.0101)

Profession of faith in Jesus Christ is first of all a matter of trust – not intellectual certainty or moral perfection. In the Presbyterian Church, we do not have to understand or know all the doctrines of the faith. Neither do we have to master all the disciplines of a mature spiritual life. Profession of faith is the beginning of a journey toward the knowledge and certainty of God, and it will take the rest of our lives to complete this journey. To trust is the key.

But trust in Jesus Christ only comes alive through discipleship – through obedient living, loving service, and daily disciplines of faith. The Book of Order is explicit about what faithful church membership requires:

- a. proclaiming the good news,
- b. taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church,
- c. praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian Church,
- d. supporting the work of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- e. participating in the governing responsibilities of the church,
- f. demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- g. responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others,
- h. living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social responsibilities of life,
- i. working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.

– (G-5.0102)

Active church membership calls us and equips us to be God’s yeast and salt and light in the unfinished cathedral of the world.

May it be so!

Reprinted from The Leader Reader, The Presbyterian Leader.com. Susan Andrews is general presbyter of the Hudson River Presbytery in New York. In 2003-2004 she was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).