

Why become a Church Member?

Introduction

We live in a society that has commitment phobia. For many of us, there are good reasons why we might be reluctant to make a commitment to someone or to an organisation. We have been let down by people in the past and we don't want to get let down again.

So for a church to ask people to become members is to some extent counter-cultural. Some people might respond by asking "can't we just come along when we want to or are able to?" Others might think that by coming along regularly and getting involved in some of the activities that they have already shown commitment.

To help explain why churches need membership and why it is right for Christians to become members this article deals with a couple of questions.

1. What is involved in becoming a member?

If you want to become a member, then normally what happens is that you ask one of the elders about membership. They will then arrange to meet with you and another elder or one of the female leaders. They will ask you about how you became a Christian, how you are getting on with following Jesus, what you think your particular gifts are and how you want to get involved in church life. They will also give you the opportunity to ask questions or raise any concerns that you might have.

They will then report back to the elders on this meeting. The purpose of this is to confirm that you have been able to talk about a real personal faith in Jesus. This is because membership is for those who are Christians (who are able to say for certain that they have eternal life because they have asked Jesus to forgive their sin and to be Lord of their life). If we allow someone to become a member who isn't able to say this, then we may give them a false sense of assurance that they are a Christian and their relationship with God is okay.

You will then be welcomed into membership at a public meeting of the church (e.g. the morning service). You may be given the opportunity to tell the congregation how you became a Christian. If you have not yet been baptised, then you will probably be baptised at the same service.

2. What is involved in being a member?

By becoming a member you are saying a couple of important things.

- a. You are saying that you belong to a particular local church. You identify with God's people. That means that you care about them and want to help encourage each other and help each other (bearing one another's burdens). (cf. Galatians 6:1-2)
- b. You are saying that you are willing to submit to the leadership of the church as they seek to teach and to disciple you and other Christians. The elders of the church have a special responsibility for the Christians that are placed into their care. One day, they will be accountable to God for each person in the church who was under their care. Membership says that we recognise that care. It is so easy in this day and age to simply wander from church to church moving on when the pastor says something to us that we find difficult to hear. (cf. Acts 20:25-31).
- c. You are saying that you are willing to serve. Church is not meant to be a passive, consumer activity where we go along to listen to sermons, enjoy the music and perhaps take part a little by joining in with the singing and the prayers. Each Christian has particular gifts from God and we are to use them to help build up the church. Paul likens this to being a part of a body. Each limb has its own special function. Indeed, some Christians have said that even

the word “member” is too weak and we would do better to describe each other as “partners in the Gospel.” (cf. 1 Corinthians 12)

- d. You are confirming that you are willing to take part in the decision making of the church. Some decisions are fairly simple such as what colour to paint the doors or how many youth clubs to run and we can leave them to a small group of members to decide. Other decisions are so important that we need every member to be involved. For example, when the church appoints new leaders, we ask the members to vote and reach a majority decision. In the New Testament, we discover that sadly there were occasions when people committed serious sin and had to be removed from the church membership because they were harming other young Christians and deceiving themselves about their own faith. Those decisions were so important that once again a majority decision of the whole church had to be taken. (cf. 1 Corinthians 5 & 2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

Conclusion

These answers help us to see why church membership is important. It is important because it enables everyone in the church to see who is there and committed to each other. We do not love anyone any less because they are not yet a member but actually we are able to ask more of those who are members and we are able to make a commitment to discipling them because we know they are committed to being with us long term.

Membership helps us to know that the right people are involved in decision making. Wouldn't it be a terrible thing if we were to make an important spiritual decision and came to the wrong conclusion because the decision was influenced by those who don't in fact love Jesus or want to serve him.

Membership is beneficial because it helps us to identify with a local church and to know that as well as putting something in, we have the support of a wide extended family to help us as we seek to follow Jesus.