

## 48. What Does It Mean to Be a Church “Member”?

All baptized Christians are, of course, members of the Body of Christ, of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church—whether they “do” anything about it or not. “Doing” something cannot mean that one merely “signs on” to a local congregation, thus becoming a member of it. Nor can it mean that by letting one’s name appear on a congregational “membership list,” a person has begun to realize the joys and benefits or, on the other hand, has begun to be responsible. It may be unfortunate that we use the same word for participation in the Christian church or in one of its local congregations *and* for belonging to all other kinds of voluntary associations. Lutherans may encourage their “members” to join and participate in all kinds of service organizations, many of which do God-pleasing work. At the same time, they do not picture that being a member of a Scout troop, a service club, or a political organization is on the same level as church membership. They do not say that in a proud manner, suggesting that they can and do look down their noses at other organizations that have membership lists.

Instead, they do say that the church as the Body of Christ and as a local congregation, an element in that body, implies a relationship that is not bordered by death. Instead, it brings the promise of eternal relations with God in Christ. While it is true that in the modern world, churches tend to advertise their wares, implicitly and often explicitly fish for members, and hope that a prospect “chooses” or “decides” for this particular church in this denomination (there is no way to get away from such impressions), Christians are to consider their participation as a gift, not an achievement. They may know that the choice or decision will depend on all kinds of accidental factors, such as where members live and where their church is located, whom they marry, whether they marry, or what kind of greeting they receive while looking over churches. Their stress is

not on their great achievement of finding the right fit, but on the exhilaration they feel when they are connected with a vibrant gathering called a congregation, or on the need they recognize to participate in the never-ending process of reforming such a gathering.

So, however it happens, one “joins” and becomes a “member.” This question about what it means to be a church member moves beyond the theology of the church to the practice. One has become a member when baptized as an infant, in cases where one or both parents or caretakers are members and promise to bring up the child in the nurture of a congregation. (One is *not* “baptized Lutheran,” or committed to “Old First Church,” just because a baptism happened there.) At the time of first communion or the affirming of baptism that is sometimes called “confirmation,” it is assumed that the newcomer has been instructed in the faith and in the assumptions of congregational and larger-church life. Usually in a ceremony the new member-to-be or new member is asked whether he or she will be a responsible hearer of the Word and participator at the Lord’s Table. The existing congregation welcomes the one who makes the promises. Usually some details of Christian practice then get announced and affirmed.

Some congregations have membership lists or books to sign. Often one becomes a member through a letter of transfer from another congregation that assures the new church home that the one being transferred is an active and responsible Christian in the former community. Those who are realistic are likely to wink and say, “And then they receive ‘offering envelopes.’ ” Without the wink, something is communicated that suggests that membership involves a vocation, a calling, a response to a loving God by bringing gifts for the work of the church and donating hours and prayer time to advance Christ’s cause.

In Lutheran theology one never *is* but is always *becoming* a Christian and thus also a member. The church is not made up of human finished products, and membership is just a step along the path of discipleship and growth.