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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Requirements for Membership: Which Ones Matter?

“Among the various groups and organizations in which you participate,” the interviewer asked, “which ones mean the most to you? In other words, which groups give you the greatest sense of satisfaction and allow you to form the deepest relationships?”

Without hesitation, Jill named two organizations; then volunteered several reasons.

If an interviewer asks *you* that question, what groups jump into your mind?

Is your congregation on that list?

A group becomes important to us when it demands our time, energy, and creativity. Healthy, effective groups and organizations communicate three messages that differentiate them from average, ho-hum groups:

1. *This organization is worth belonging to.*
2. *This organization has set high expectations for its members.*
3. *This organization thinks enough of me to ask for my unique contribution.*

Studies indicate that successful groups and organizations establish clear boundaries: specific guidelines about what constitutes membership. By contrast, organizations with indistinct membership expectations communicate a question: what is this group really about?

Unfortunately, only about one in four church members in a typical congregation commit to all aspects of their membership.¹ This 26 percent of members are loyal to and have a strong psychological connection to their church.

By contrast, 56 percent of the members meet only a few of their church’s expectations—they are *not engaged*. Another 18 percent of members are truly *disengaged*—they rarely attend and are uncommitted to membership-expectations.

What causes less-engaged members? Evidence suggests that younger generations form looser connections with formal institutions. But even among younger adults, the desire for connection and identification with their church remains strong.

Two trends can increase the percentage of less-engaged parishioners:

- Increasing percentages of new church members are first-time members or “switchers” from another faith tradition. How will these people know what it means to be a member of this congregation?
- Many congregations have classes for new members, but the sessions tend to be (a) few, (b) filled with assumptions about prior knowledge, and (c) directed at “to do” lists. New members can miss the point when these sessions center on specific actions. They may fail to see the values and theology that lie behind the suggested behaviors.

Healthy, effective congregations communicate seven member-expectations. These are NOT listed in order of importance; all seven are equally significant.

1. *Commit to spiritual growth.* A range of activities, programs, or disciplines provide the stimulus for continued spiritual and personal growth. People choose to participate in a Bible study, a prayer group, a discussion group, or a



learning group. The essential ingredient for the design of these groups is intentional promotion of individual spiritual growth and reflection. The participants care about one another, hold one another accountable, and encourage one another to mature in faith.

2. *Commit to worshipping with others.* Membership requires being part of a faith *community*. Community develops when people share experiences and encounters with the divine. In congregations, people gather to worship. Thus, church membership requires regular attendance at worship services in order for community to happen.

3. *Commit to financial support.* All organizations need money to maintain facilities, pay staff, fund programs, and serve the community. Just as a responsible family member takes on a share of the household expenses, a faithful church member takes on a share of the household of God expenses. The biblical guidelines about financial support are unambiguous. Giving to the church should be planned, proportional to household resources, and shared with great joy.

4. *Commit to the congregation's mission and vision.* This membership requirement begins with an emotional investment in the church's future. Responsible members support the church's core purpose and future vision with their words, attitudes, and actions.

Some members express their commitment by volunteering for roles that address the needs of current members (Sunday school teacher, coordinating the youth program, visiting shut-ins). Other members take on roles such as serving on the governing board or singing in the choir.

Through these actions the individual member would affirm that "I have the opportunity to do what I do best." By contrast, blindly slotting members into vacant positions that need filling, simply because *someone* in the church needs to do this job, says, "Running the church is more important than you and your personal gifts for ministry." When members engage in ministries that fit their gifts, the system says, "You make a unique and important contribution to the mission and ministry of this congregation."

5. *Commit to the needs of your community and world.* An inwardly focused congregation fails to fulfill one of Jesus's Great Commandments—to love others as we love ourselves. For that reason, another membership-requirement is to demonstrate care for those who are not members of the congregation.

Often, members show this commitment through volunteer work in community agencies or charity work sponsored by the congregation. Other members go on mission trips that assist in the restoration of communities. Still others advocate on behalf of those in need.

6. *Commit to hospitality.* This requirement of membership does not fit into a class, program, or other structured activity. Rather, this behavior extends hospitality to others by making friends, offering forgiveness, expressing encouragement, sharing a meal, inviting someone out for coffee, or doing a simple, kind deed. Without intentional effort, in

the busyness of our lives, we overlook how generous hospitality makes a difference in the lives of others and our congregation.

7. *Commit to prayer.* Pray for the congregation as a whole—that faithful decisions are made, programs and activities change lives, and relationships are healed. Pray for the pastor and other key leaders in the church, the needs of the community, and the transformation of the nation and world.

Four of these seven member-expectations suggest less about behavior or "doing church" and more about attitude or "being the church" (commitment to spiritual growth, the congregation's mission and vision, hospitality, and prayer). Thus, these four membership-requirements often drop under the radar, as leaders focus on observable, measurable outcomes.

Further, The Gallup Organization research warns that a small percentage of members (people who meet the membership expectations of *doing*—numbers 2, 3, and 5 above) are *actively disengaged* from the congregation's mission and vision. These individuals are psychologically hostile "C.A.V.E. Dwellers: Consistently Against Virtually Everything."

Dealing with this short list of CAVE Dwellers requires that leaders exercise considerable discipline. Otherwise, instead of staying positive and proactive, they focus most of their energy on reacting to these sand-burr personalities. When that happens, leaders neglect the continuous strategic thinking necessary to helping more members meet all seven membership-expectations.

What are the member-expectations in our congregation?

◆ Ask congregational leaders and veteran members to review the seven expectations of membership. Estimate the percentage of our current members who are fully committed to these membership-expectations.

◆ Review our congregation's central activities and efforts. Do they fully support and reflect our membership-expectations? If not, how can we modify our efforts to reflect more closely our church's core values?

◆ How carefully does our congregation introduce and explain to newcomers the seven expectations of membership?

◆ How do we nurture new members so that they grow in all seven commitments?

¹ Research by The Gallup Organization. See *Growing An Engaged Church* by Albert L. Winseman (Gallup Press, 2007).