



## Why Hard Conversations about Membership Are Good

Over a year ago, our church began a mini-series on church membership. In the series, we discussed God's goals for relationships within our community of faith and how membership (formal commitment to the members of the local church) was necessary to accomplish these goals.

Following the series, I felt convicted. I had been scared to ask friends at church questions about their membership. What if I asked a regular attender why they weren't a member and they told me it was because they didn't really like the church or were planning on leaving? What if I asked a missing member where they had been and they told me they were attending another church? What if my questions pushed people away? It seemed easier to just let things be.

I realized those fears reflected unbiblical thinking. Over the past year, we as a church grew in pursuing conversations about church membership that could potentially be uncomfortable. We're still learning, but the conversations about membership with people have produced some great fruit. Even though some were sad, I am so glad we pursued the conversations.

Here are a just a few reasons why hard conversations about church membership are good.

**First, the conversations are good because they teach the importance of church membership.** To ignore the elephant in the room-a person's hesitancy to fully and formally commit relationally to others in the church-undermines how important we claim growth together as a local church is. Talking about membership demonstrates that our commitment to one another is not just some abstract theological discussion.

**Second, the conversations are good because they are truthful.** Without these conversations, we assume we know what people's motivations are for their actions (or inaction). Each person's journey of walking with Christ has unique elements. The process by which God grows you is different than how He grows me. There are good (and bad) reasons why a person might delay becoming a member. There are good (and bad) reasons why a member might leave a church. But without honest conversations, we won't understand where the people we love are in their walk with the Lord.

**Third, the conversations are good because some people feel called to leave but are afraid to do so.** Because of our conversations, some people did leave the church. This was the exact outcome I had feared and it was sad! But that didn't mean that it wasn't a good thing for them.

Some had sensed God calling them elsewhere but were afraid to leave. Forcing ourselves to ask questions about what we believe about membership and ministry in the local church is spiritually healthy. I am convinced some who have left our church grew in ways they would not have grown had they remained fellowshipping with us. That hurts my pride but helps me rejoice in God and His work in their life.

**Fourth, the conversations are good because they help the church focus on those who are “all in.”** On the one hand, some people who were already committed to our church were excited about declaring that formally and their decision to do so encouraged the body. These conversations brought such joy to me.

On the other hand, people on the fringe of the church consume a lot of emotional and ministerial energy. We love them and want them to feel connected and so we reach out. When they are unhappy, we hurt with them and want to know what we can fix or change to help them desire to stay and get connected. The impulse behind this desire is good and biblical but if the church becomes so focused on making people who aren’t part of the church (and don’t wish to be) stay in the church that they neglect members, I think we’ve made a mistake. We should diligently seek those who are not part of the church but not neglect the feeding of the sheep.

I miss friends when they leave and often think of them but I have great joy as I see the people God is bringing to our church who are called to be here. I also rejoice that God is bigger than Bethany Community Church and love to hear how my friends are growing deep roots and producing fruit in other fields. Hard conversations help us to be more obedient to Him and encourage those we love to pursue God with greater vigor.

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