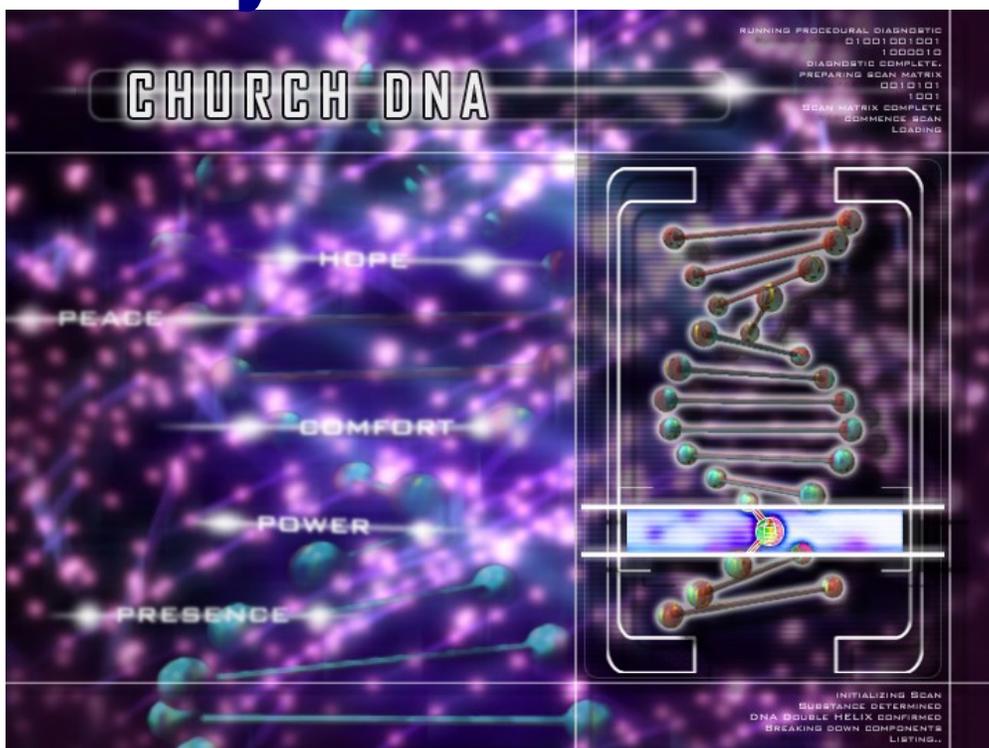


Membership Issues

by Kent R. Hunter



There are a number of membership issues being discussed these days as the emerging church of the 21st Century seeks to relate to people—particularly young adult, postmodern generations.

1. Most churches still have membership. Even among postmodern churches, the idea of membership remains a valuable concept. People still come to the point where they want to make a reciprocal commitment in response to the commitment the church has made to them.
2. Move from belief \Rightarrow belong (believe, then belong) to belong \Rightarrow belief (belong, then believe). In the past, the traditional way of approaching newcomers to the church was to disallow involvement in the church until they participated in a certain amount of cognitive exercises (membership classes) and then made a commitment to the church. Then they were accepted as members with credibility and integrity. Today, in the postmodern world, the primary need for people is to belong. Therefore, a congregation that is receptive to reaching new people is one that allows people to belong and feel accepted with integrity and credibility, to whatever extent it is allowable within the teaching of that church. The concept of membership is not emphasized that dramatically.
3. The belong \Rightarrow belief (belong, then believe) model means that belonging provides a high level of genuine acceptance with credibility. This requires strong communication of Bible study fellowship groups also known as Adult Bible Fellowships (see the booklet *ABFs: Adult Bible Fellowships* and the audio resource *How to Design and Develop Fellowship Groups*). The concept is that people can belong and enjoy the benefits of connectedness before they choose to believe and go through whatever necessary requirements are included for membership acceptance.
4. Focus more on the crowd than the core. In other words, do not talk about membership or emphasize, publicly, the difference between the two. When it comes time for a decision-making



process that includes only members, send information privately in a mailing to those who are "bonafide members" of the congregation. Do not flaunt that membership status among those who feel they are a part of the congregation, who are not yet members. People need to feel as though they genuinely belong, even though they have not made a commitment to membership.

Remember that in today's world, many people will be involved in the congregation, perhaps for years, without making the membership plunge. These are often postmodern people who are not institutionally driven, but may have the same strong commitment to the church as those who are members. When they are ready, there should be an avenue that would allow them to become full-fledged members.

Churches that understand this concept allow people to receive envelopes, sing in the choir, usher, and participate in many other activities, just like "full-fledged" members. However, many churches do not provide opportunities for teaching Vacation Bible School or Sunday school, preaching in worship, etc. for those who have not made a biblical commitment through a membership class or system.

It is not necessary to make membership "easy." Make sure those who become members are in tune with the philosophy of ministry of the church, are highly committed, and show some biblical maturity.

5. Describe membership as a high commitment. Some churches emphasize attendance, tithing, Bible study, small groups, and reaching out to others as characteristics of membership.

All of this is done in the context of allowing those who choose not to be highly committed to be accepted and a part of the group.



6. Distinguish clearly between values and beliefs. One of the challenges some denominations have faced, which has undermined their effectiveness, is the inability to recognize that organizations are strong when they have a clear definition of both values and beliefs. The beliefs are the doctrinal content, "This is what we consider to be truth." The values are those things we consider to be important. In the emergence of denominations several hundred years ago, those values were ethnically driven and frequently revolved around certain languages, worship styles, and even lifestyles and food. Today, in the melting pot that America has become, those values no longer supply the glue that holds denominations together. In the absence of other values, such as a commitment to the Great Commission, denominations have declined. As you work with those people who move toward membership, it is important to emphasize not only beliefs but also values.

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