

Covenantal Community

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

Preached April 25, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

Introduction. During my dating years as a teenager, I went on a first date with a girl to her church. (She was a preacher's kid like me, but her father was Baptist.) Everything in the service seemed normal to my experience – I knew some of the hymns and I understood most of the sermon and there was no handling of snakes or anything like that. The service ended with an altar call and a few people went forward. In a few moments, the pastor asked for a showing of hands of the members of that church if they would receive into membership those who were standing at the front of the church. That was a new twist for me. As a Methodist, I had never seen the congregation giving approval for a person to join the church.

In most Christian churches, church membership is a common practice and is important. People who attend and participate in the life of a congregation are often asked or encouraged to join the church. How one becomes a member may vary from church to church, but nearly all churches that have "membership" require those joining to make certain commitments.

This morning I want us to explore together the meaning of membership and what it means to be a member of this congregation of the United Methodist Church. If you are a member, it will be an excellent review for you and hopefully help you to renew your commitment a member. If you are not a member, it will be a time for you to consider uniting with this congregation and what that means.

Biblical membership. In our scripture lesson, we hear Paul reflecting upon what it meant to be church member as he wrote to the believers in Corinth. He used a metaphor that any human with the intellect of a four-year-old could appreciate. He wrote that as baptized followers of Jesus, we are

members of a body. Everyone in the church has a special role to play that is important and impacts all the other members.

I brought a friend to church today – Mr. Potato Head. I want to be sure his name appears on the pew register. Since he cannot write, Patty, would you record his name and contact information. Many of us or our children and grandchildren have played with a Mr./Mrs. Potato Head and have experimented with placing the various parts of the body in different locations. Intuitively we know what belongs where, even little children know that.

The idea of church membership preceded Paul's letter to Corinth. In the events that are described in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came upon 120 of those who had followed Jesus, a large number of people responded to a sermon Peter preached. Luke says of those 3,000 – "So those who welcomed his message were baptized and that day about three thousand were added."

Immediately after Luke tells about the people being added, he writes, "They devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." These "members" committed themselves to these basic practices. They were a committed community of Jesus followers.

Church History of Membership. The pattern of Church membership from the beginning of the Christian movement was important but it was largely seen much like in Acts 2 – people were "baptized" and devoted themselves to the disciplines within the church. Eventually in the western church, membership came to be baptism at birth and affirmed through confirmation. As Christianity's influence increased in many areas nearly everyone was baptized at birth and was considered under the influence of the church unless they left or were kicked out of the church.

The Reformation brought into existence national churches that tended to follow the Roman Catholic model of parish church where nearly all children were baptized and considered members even though they may never profess the faith. Some groups began to emphasize personal conversion and membership came by a personal choice to

join a congregation.

From early on, Methodism had a sense of membership, but not **church** membership. John and Charles Wesley were very much a part of the Church of England and encouraged Methodists to be part of the state Church. Both resisted Methodism becoming a church movement – Charles to his very death. But within the movement, people became members of societies which were larger gatherings of Methodists, typically in a community. The societies were subdivided into classes of 12 people for deeper reflection and fellowship. Within the classes, people were given "tickets" once a quarter based on their attendance and being in good standing. The tickets allowed the person to participate in particular activities – no ticket, no admittance.

While much has changed since the days of Wesley, much of our heritage continues to guide us in our understanding of membership in the United Methodist Church. We continue to affirm and to celebrate infant baptism and recognize our children as baptized members of the church. We urge our children when they reach an appropriate level of maturity to go through confirmation where they will be nurtured in the fundamentals of faith and be given opportunity to publicly profess their personal faith. We invite people who are not of confirmation age, to become members by making a personal commitment to join. That commitment requires a person to have been baptized (previously or at the time of joining), affirm faith in Jesus Christ, turn from all that keeps her/him from God, acknowledge the Christian faith as contained in scripture, and make a covenantal commitment to the church.

On What Ship are you Sailing. I have just used a word describing membership that is not very popular in our culture - *commitment*. It seems we are living in a culture that shuns commitment and accountability. Many are hesitant to make significant or long-term commitments to things such as marriage, church membership and civic clubs. What baffles the mind is that some will make long-term commitments (72 to 84) months to purchase a vehicle –or a house – 40 years or even 50 years. (That is truly a long-term

commitment.) It seems that many want certain benefits without paying the price of commitment.

That reminds me of something I heard recently: *"You think no one cares about who and where you are? Try missing a couple of car payments."*

When our sons were younger, I tried my hand coaching instructional league baseball. One of the first teams I coached had boys from all parts of town and home backgrounds. One of the players who came from a stable and affluent home was attempting to play baseball and soccer in the same season. As a result, he hardly ever came to practice. He was a better than average ball player. As a coach, I believed playing time was based on one's commitment to the team and one's ability to contribute to the team's success. Well, after the first game, this player's father came to me complaining about the amount of playing time he had in the game. I explained my position. Later that child dropped off the team. A few years later, I found myself in the office of this child's father, who was a dermatologist. As he was cutting a questionable area of skin from my back, I wondered if I had done the right thing with his son. It is amazing how having a person holding a knife causes one to rethink convictions.

When I was doing research for this sermon, I came across a written statement that I found to be filled with irony and humor. *"The church should be less like a cruise ship and more like a battleship, says Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries"* (christianitytoday.com/le/currenttrendscolumns/leadershipweekly/cln50418.html). When I first read that statement I chuckled but as I thought about it, I realized I like the metaphor. For the next few minutes, I would like for us to ride the waves into the shore to conclude this message. Hopefully in these illustrations you can hear what it really means to be a member and have an understanding why you should be a member.

Being on a cruise ship is being on vacation. Passengers are there to relax and have a good time. Being on a battleship is about being on a mission. It is about being part of higher purpose upon which others depend for safety and security. (Is church membership more like being a cruise ship or battleship?)

On a cruise ship, if passengers fail to

show up, it will mean they may miss a meal or an activity. It is basically a matter of personal loss. But if on a battleship a sailor fails to show up, the mission is put at risk. If the one responsible for reading the radar is not present, the ship is subject to attack or can be at risk in dangerous waters. The failure to show up can put the ship and those on it at risk. Someone will probably be required to cover the missing sailor's job. (Is church membership more like being a cruise ship or battleship?)

On a cruise ship, others have the job of taking care of "me" or "you." It is the role of the crew of the ship to make the passengers happy, to enjoy their voyage and to care for their needs. If a sickness or injury occurs, the passenger receives first class treatment. On a battleship, sailors are cared for as well but on a different level. It is not a matter of their happiness or enjoyment but their importance to the crew and mission. In a real sense, each has a certain role in "caring" for the others. On a battleship everyone's role contributes to the welfare of the others. Meals are prepared by members of the crew, the medical staff is part of the crew, and custodial services are provided by members. (Is church membership more like being a cruise ship or battleship?)

On a cruise ship, most passengers form only casual acquaintances with other passengers and crew. (Sometimes there are exceptions like the woman who said to the man seated across from her at dinner, "You remind me of my third husband." He responded, "How many times have you been married?" She replied, "Twice.") One may have a close relationship with friends who came with them but when they leave the ship, most others are lost in the mass of humanity left behind. But on a battleship, the sailors are a "band of brothers." They are called on to put their lives on the line for the sake of their comrades. (Is church membership more like being a cruise ship or battleship?)

On a cruise ship the commitment level is to spend a few days aboard for the cost of the ticket. For the sailor on the battleship, it can be a life career. The level of commitment is much deeper and often keeps the sailor out to sea for long periods of time and can cost him his life.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus said, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their*

life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

Being a member of this congregation is like being part of the crew of a battleship. We are on a mission; each person's role is critical; we are a "band of brothers" who care for one another. Together we accomplish the mission God has given us. To be a member here is to be part of something great for God.

Invitation. This morning we have set aside time for all of us to make our commitment to be involved in service as members of this church. I am asking all of you who are members to review your EMIM card you brought from home or pick one up in the pew and fill it out. Please include your name. Please commit to serve in at least one area of ministry. When the music begins for the final hymn, you are invited to bring the card forward and lay it on the altar. As you return to your seats, one of ushers will hand you a "Methodist ticket" which will be a reminder of your commitment as a member.

If you are not a member of the church and this morning have come to the decision to join, I would ask you fill out the yellow ticket in your bulletin and bring it forward to the altar. We will contact you and we will lead you in the steps of becoming a member.

"By taking this ticket,

- I reaffirm my faith in Christ,
- I turn from all that keeps me from following him fully,
- I commit to support the church:

By praying for the church and its members
By attending worship and a small group regularly

By giving proportionally of the resources I receive

By being involved in at least one ministry

By inviting at least one person to attend our church in the next six months