

Be Careful Who You Let in Your Church!

The title of this article may seem like an odd thing for a DOM to say. Aren't we supposed to be in favor of church growth? Of course we are. Notice I did not say, "Be careful who you let in your church building." The doors should be open to all and the message of Jesus Christ is for everyone. Your church should seek to *minister* to the entire mission field, but *membership* in the church is another matter.

Nearly any other organization has higher standards for membership than the typical Baptist church. That is because we have equated conversion to Christ, marked by the sign of believer's baptism, with qualification for membership in a particular local body of believers. If someone gives testimony of faith in Christ and scriptural baptism, we consider them candidates for membership. In the church in which I grew up, you walked the aisle, shared your testimony with the pastor, and asked to join the church "by promise of letter from another Baptist church" or "by statement of your faith and believer's baptism." Right then and there the pastor would call the church to vote to receive you into membership.

Maybe that was okay in a time when Baptist churches were all pretty much the same in doctrine, polity, and ministry priorities. That day has gone the way of the eight-track tape and the typewriter. You cannot assume that if someone comes from a church with the same label or affiliations as yours, then they will be a good fit as a member in your church. Remember, when you grant someone membership you have empowered them to have a voice in the affairs of the church and influence about the future of the church. A member is a *stakeholder*. Be careful in granting such standing to anyone!

A number of BBA churches and all of our church plants have a process for membership. In general terms, here is the philosophy and practice.

1. *Distinguish between conversion/baptism and church membership.* Faith in Christ and scriptural baptism are necessary for church membership, but not sufficient for it. All born-again believers are part of the universal Church. There is a whole lot more that goes into being a member of a specific local church.

2. *Define what it means to be a member in your church.* What does membership mean in terms of essential doctrine, commitments, and conduct? How does one become a member? How is one removed from membership and under what conditions? These things need to be stated clearly in your church's governing documents.

3. *Require all membership candidates to complete a "New Members" or "Discovering (insert church name here)" class.* In this class you teach the values, mission, and ministry priorities of the church. You also teach the church's polity, organizational structure, essential doctrine, and

commitments expected of all members. Don't forget to share the gospel as well. You may be surprised how many people who come to the new members class are not yet saved. By the way, beware of the person who protests, "I've been a Baptist all my life. I don't need this class." These are especially the ones who need it! Having a new members class will weed out folks who really are not serious about church membership. It will give prospective members the chance to back out if your church is not the kind of church they want. It will be an encouragement to those who really do fit the personality of your church and are motivated by high standards.

4. Require all who complete the class to sign a members' covenant before they can be received into membership. The covenant states a member's commitments in terms of attitude, behavior, service, and stewardship. It also provides a firmer basis for church discipline should such measures be needed in the future. The new member can never say with credibility, "I didn't know I was supposed to do that."

Let me know how I can help you. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. There are lots of good models for implementing a healthy new members process. Just be careful who you let in your church!