

Dismembership plan

by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



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When House of Mercy was founded in 1996, having a membership roll wasn't on its radar. "There were maybe 30 people at church," explained Debbie Blue, who has copastored the St. Paul, Minnesota, congregation since it began, "and most of them

definitely didn't want to be a member of a church. We were barely able to convince them to come to a thing called *church*."

Blue recalled that when someone eventually brought up the subject of formal membership, "people didn't want it. They didn't want a thing that would define some people in and some people out."

A lack of formal membership didn't prevent people from being invested in the community. "They were invested," said Blue, "some more than others." The community realized that defining yourself as part of something "has important implications: this body is you, and you have to keep it breathing. We were always trying to come up with ways people could say emphatically, 'I am a part of this community.' But signing up [for church membership] was not the way that people felt this."

House of Mercy began as an American Baptist church, but it's always had an eclectic identity, informed by multiple traditions. In 2008, the church became affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—and the ELCA requires congregations to keep a member roll.

The ELCA was "very open to our redefining what membership might be," said Blue, "but we needed to have it in some form."

So Blue and her colleagues tried to conceive of membership in a way that made sense in their context. They came up with the idea of "dismembership," a tongue-in-cheek term for a concept that they presented as akin to an anti-institutional cooperative. "We weren't saying, 'Become a member of our church,'" said Blue. "We were saying, 'Be a part of an alternative narrative. Be part of a community that defines itself around the radical story of Jesus Christ.'"

What's the difference between this and ordinary church membership? Is there more to this dismembership plan than just self-referential repackaging for a community that values subversiveness?

House of Mercy dismember Kriss Zulkosky doesn't think there is, and she isn't wild about membership in general. "The commercial world has really had a negative impact on it," she remarks. "I am encouraged to be a member at Costco, Blockbuster, Papa John's—it is so base and shallow." She also thinks that having members can work against House of Mercy's emphasis on "keep[ing] the doors, windows and

minds open for everyone to enter."

Still, Zulkosky doesn't think that having a membership roll has caused any problems at the church. She sees it as little more than "a quirky way for House of Mercy to deal with what has been asked of them" by the ELCA.

"I think [dismembership] is just a fun and subversive way to talk about the concept of commitment," said Neal Bernards, another dismember. It "speaks to the pastors' discomfort" with asking people to join a church or support it financially, but it also emphasizes that the point is not "joining this particular church, but a way to live outside the system of popular culture."

Tim Snyder acknowledged that dismemberships are essentially a silly neologism that just means "membership." But "language really matters," added Snyder, who did an ethnographic study of House of Mercy for his master's thesis at Luther Seminary. "Because it pokes fun and is a little bit ridiculous, this kind of language becomes a practice in humility, in being self-critical and self-reflective."

This sort of self-awareness seems to have helped some people look past their discomfort and toward a more pragmatic view of membership. "I am a dismember only for number purposes," said Zulkosky, "to help them figure out financially what will happen in the upcoming year." Bernards observed that "by making a financial commitment, you've pledged to stick around for at least the coming year. Members have a vested interest in seeing the community thrive." Sonja Olson compared dismemberships to the pledge drives that the church has conducted in the past, but with the additional weight of "putting into words what it is we are pledging to."

"I do think that the idea of dismemberships rallied people," said Blue. "It helps a lot to have a list of people who have pledged their commitment. If you need someone to do something, you can go to the list."

For House of Mercy dismember Sean Kershaw, this connection between membership and doing something is critical. "I think it's good to say publicly that you are going to be part of a group, with an obligation," he explained. "There's a mental adjustment that happens." He stresses the "mission objective" implicit in membership: "You are called to be a part of something, to refuse to hide your light under a basket." But Kershaw, who heads a membership-based policy advocacy organization, acknowledged that he's "way more comfortable with the idea of joining a group than some of the other participants in the church."

Joining, after all, is something one does at a conventional church—and several people argued that a crucial part of House of Mercy's identity is the welcome mat it puts out for people who are suspicious of church. Bernards is in favor of having membership, but he also pointed out the risk of "becoming a traditional church, which is what many House of Mercy attendees are trying to avoid. Many grew up in very traditional evangelical churches and don't want to repeat the experience."

Yet even in a context that includes strong anti-institutional impulses, there are real advantages to structure and order. "We haven't been a very organized church," admitted Blue. "Now we have everybody's e-mails and names and addresses together. I think official 'dismembership' has helped us be a little more organized."