

Loose connections: What's happening to church membership?

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



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When I went to church recently with a friend, we didn't attend her church because she doesn't have a church anymore. She was once a loyal member of a church but dropped her membership when she was disappointed by a change in leadership. Since then, she's attended various churches but never joined one. One might say she's church shopping, but the shopping has gone on so long that it's clear she has no intention of buying—of joining a church. She meets regularly with a small group for Bible study, and her children attend youth groups of various kinds, but she is not affiliated with a particular church.

My friend is not unusual. A set of 2010 Gallup polls revealed that while religious participation (at least self-reported participation) is on the rise, Americans are less likely to identify with a particular religious group. People do not belong to churches the way they once did, even when they show up for religious services.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that in recent years new ways of relating to institutions have developed—ways that are fluid and hard to pin down. People develop "loose connections." At a time when many churches face declining membership, they must also grapple with the reality that even those who attend have a different idea of what participation means.

In the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that the U.S. lacked many institutions of the Old World, but that Americans were nevertheless a "nation of joiners." They created and enthusiastically participated in voluntary organizations, including churches. Americans were not constrained by duty or tradition to join churches, but they did. The reason, Tocqueville decided, was "self-interest properly understood." People saw the benefit of being connected. For 200 years, the voluntary nature of American religion has created a dynamic religious marketplace and produced vibrant religious congregations.

Voluntary church membership has been strong in American history, but it has never been stable. Church membership has waxed and waned over the years. It increased dramatically at two periods in particular. The first was in the mid-19th century, during the Second Great Awakening, when reformers like Charles Finney argued that Christian faith demands an individual commitment. A series of revivals led by Finney and a host of frontier preachers brought religion to ordinary people and sparked not only a massive renewal of religious piety but a spike in church membership, especially among Baptists and Methodists. Historians calculate that whereas in 1800 only one in six Americans was a church member, by 1850 that figure was one in

three.

The other major growth period for church membership was during the baby-boom years following World War II. Many kinds of voluntary organizations flourished in this period, from parent-teacher associations to social clubs to service organizations. Historians argue that belonging to a church was a primary means of social belonging; church membership marked one's place in the community.

For mainline Protestants, the postwar religious boom led to a peak in church membership in the mid-1960s. With an increase in members came building programs, large staffs and the expansion of national denominations. For many, this model of church life is still the norm even though membership has been declining for almost 50 years.

The 1960s should not be taken as the historical norm, notes historian Mark Noll. He contrasts the mid-20th-century model of membership with churches in the 19th century, whose primary income came from renting pews. Finney created a stir when he created a "free church" in New York City—a church no one had to pay to sit down in. Noll notes that denominations in the 19th century survived for years with just three or four staff members at the national level—not the hundreds that came to be employed by denominations in the 20th century. The rise of what Episcopal bishop Greg Rickel calls the "religious-industrial complex" is a phenomenon of the 20th century.

This model of church is threatened by the trend toward loose connections, especially as that trend takes hold among people in their twenties and thirties. Young people are less likely to join either a church or a social club; they stay in one place for less time and connect through informal networks rather than through institutions. Says Wuthnow: "In this demographic, it is less common than was true among their parents to attend church regularly (unless they are married and have children) and more common to engage in church shopping and hopping; i.e., attend sporadically at several different congregations."

Wuthnow points to geographical transience and technological shifts. "Although churchgoers still have friends at their local congregations, they now have loose ties with friends, organizations, and information sources that span the globe." In many cases these other connections are as important in shaping behavior as are ties to a local church.

Pastors corroborate Wuthnow's assertion. They note a deep reluctance among young adults to join a church. People in their thirties, notes Rebecca Kemper Poos, a UCC pastor in Colorado, are wary of any long-term commitment to an ideology or institution. Bill Bohline, a Lutheran pastor in Lakeville, Minnesota, said a recent study showed that the demographics of his Lakeville congregation matched the demographics of the area in every respect but one—among thirtysomethings. The thirtysomethings were absent from church. While some of them drop their kids off at the church for programs, they don't come in themselves.

Despite the changing patterns of church affiliation, most churches still approach membership the way they did in the 1960s. New attendees are encouraged to attend a class to learn about the history and theology of the denomination and of the local congregation, with the expectation that they will join the church. But if new modes of affiliation are appearing, churches will need new ways of thinking about membership.

Rickel, an Episcopal bishop in Washington State, thinks that churches do not yet know how to measure what this means. "What denominational metrics people are asking—how many people are in church on Sunday, for example—may not be the right measure for today. The measures that contemporary churches need may be more intuitive and more spiritual in nature."

Rickel points to a small church in his diocese that is located along the Columbia River. The population of the area is declining, and membership growth is not a realistic goal. Nevertheless, the congregation is a dynamic and important part of the community, because it is a community and service center. Rickel likens it to a base camp—a place along the journey where people stop to receive nourishment, training, basic supplies and encouragement.

"We've only been paying attention," Rickel said, "to the people who stay. But maybe that's not the purpose [of the base camp]. Maybe we've been treating base camps as permanent residences."

In order to operate as base camps, Rickel said, congregations need not give up their identity or cease offering a challenging "rule for living." In fact, he said, young adults are eager for such a challenge. But churches need to be able to witness to the gospel when they have only a few chances to reach any one person.

This is the key to the era we are entering, said sociologist Wade Clark Roof. "Local congregations have to take into account the fact that they may only have a one-time shot. Churches will need to put new emphasis on touching people's lives instead of gaining new members. These are two different enterprises."

Institutions, Roof noted, want to count people. They want to report growth. But they may not be able to do that in the way they once did. Their assessment of vitality will have to take a different form.

"The forms are going to be more fluid, but this simply means that people will have to think seriously about what is worth preserving and why," said Roof. "That is not a bad question for religious institutions to ask. Lived traditions are always adapting to new circumstances."

Craig Mueller is pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in the Wrigleyville neighborhood of Chicago, home to many young-adult professionals. On any given Sunday, he says, he can look out over his congregation and see several dozen young people whose names he does not know and who are unlikely to pursue a relationship with the church. They do not stay for the social hour, and they do not participate in small groups or Bible studies.

Mueller said he once thought it was his job to pursue these worshipers and lead them into membership. Now he is not so sure. He believes that people need a spectrum of entry points to church and a variety of ways of participating—from just sitting in a pew to being on a committee to helping with worship planning.

More than half the members at Holy Trinity are under the age of 40, and more than 300 new members have joined the church over the past decade.

Mueller said he wants attenders to know that there is a lot to be gained from a deeper and more sustained commitment to the church, yet he also tries to extend a no-strings-attached welcome.

"In light of the demographics and the sociological trends, it is clear that we need to welcome people in their ambivalence, and at the same time find ways to invite and deepen commitment. It is a difficult balance," Mueller said.

One thing is clear: a church shouldn't measure the effectiveness of its ministries solely by counting members.

"Let's say that JoAnn has joined a committee. Great. I can measure that," said Mueller. "But let's say that Mark is living his baptism in committed ways in his daily life and I can't see that. That doesn't make it less significant." People who do not want further involvement in church are still being nourished "by the assembly and by the liturgy," he insisted.

Not everyone agrees with Mueller. James Wellman, a Presbyterian pastor who teaches American religion at the University of Washington, worries that trends toward loose ways of belonging to church reinforce a consumerist mentality. People move around and refuse to commit because they think there may be something more tantalizing still out there.

In their study of contemporary religion, *American Grace*, sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell argue that belonging is good for people and that people who belong to institutions tend to increase their contributions to society in other areas. Regular churchgoers are more likely to vote, to volunteer their time and to take an active role in civic life.

Belonging to a particular community also has deep theological meaning. The beautiful part of belonging to a congregation, said Peter Marty, a Lutheran pastor in Iowa, "is that you create a community of common people gathered for a holy purpose and united by that sense of purpose." When you become a member, he said, you discover the privilege of being a giver as well as a taker. A church, unlike other sectors of society, does not have qualifications for joining. Membership is open to all. But it does involve an element of commitment, even a covenant, with a specific group of people over time.

"That is the secret gift that unfolds as you become integrated into something that is larger than yourself. You find yourself saying yes to possibilities that you would never otherwise imagine."

The word *membership* has powerful biblical roots, and it is difficult to imagine a Christian community making no appeal to it. "We are all members," writes Paul in Ephesians, "one of another." The metaphor expresses an indivisible unity—Christians belong to one another the way an arm belongs to a body. And an arm can't live without being part of the body. Paul invokes the language of *member* and *body* to try to persuade early Christians that they belonged to one another in a profound way.

The challenge for churches is to be able to recognize and adapt to people's looser ways of affiliating with church while continuing to teach that belonging to one another is indispensable to the Christian vision.