

I'm not married to my church, are you?

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I was with a group of folk from another congregation recently, introducing them to [NEXT Church](#) and talking about my involvement as co-chair. We got to talking about generational differences when it comes to membership in an institution, particularly a church. Millennials are way less wired toward joining a group in the sense of signing on the dotted line. In many cases they are committed to the organization and will support it through time and money, but they do not see the point of being a member.

I made an offhand comment about churches that have people re-commit to church membership every year. Rather than having someone join and be a member of a church “forever,” there is an annual discernment process. The church leadership re-introduces folks to what it means to be a member (and presumably, the expectations are high), and asks people to consider whether they are willing to devote the time and energy toward that endeavor. As always, non-members are welcome to worship and serve in the community, to receive pastoral care, etc.

There was some predictable backlash to this idea, some of which I can understand. There are times in a church’s life when things just aren’t that much fun. A beloved pastor leaves and the energy declines. There are conflicts and crises. Are we saying it’s OK for people to bail just because things get hard, or because the church is not suiting their needs?

And yes, our culture is one in which ties to institutions and communities are more tenuous than ever. So people are right to ask whether a yearly church membership drive feeds that lack of commitment. OR, does it simply acknowledge the world as it is, not as we want it to be? People can carp all they want about “kids today,” but how does that work as an evangelism strategy?

One comment really grabbed me: *What, are people going to get married year by year now?* I didn’t have the presence of mind at the time to question that analogy. But now, a few days later... No. Just no.

Church membership is not like a marriage. It's just not. Don't believe me? Consider this: when a person relocates because of a job, there is often grief over leaving one's church. But rarely does someone pass up that job because they have made a commitment to their worshiping community. But I know plenty of people who have done that because a move would be bad for their spouse or family.

We use the marriage analogy all the time in the church. Pastors seeking another call feel like they're "cheating on their church," like they're "running around behind people's backs." I can relate to the sentiment—there is a zone of secrecy that must be present in these situations, and it can feel inauthentic and sneaky. Still, I find these kinds of metaphors very unhelpful. Pastors are not called to a church until death do they part. They are called for a season of the church's life. And in the Presbyterian Church (USA), there is at least a minimal sense of re-upping each year, in the sense of negotiating and re-approving terms of call.

Why would we not at least consider giving church members the same freedom to reaffirm their commitment to a congregation that pastors themselves have? Why do we get to leave whenever we feel the winds of the Spirit blowing, but church members are on the hook for the rest of their lives?

The real crux of this membership stuff is not people's lack of commitment. It's that the church has done a poor job of teaching discernment and discipleship.

*Discernment:* sensing the presence and leading of God, which goes beyond what makes me happy in the moment.

And *discipleship:* commitment to following the Way of Jesus, even when it's hard, even when it means being in a community with people who are sometimes a pain to deal with.

A church that does a good job of this doesn't need to worry about a mass exodus of people if the interim's a boring preacher.

And a church that does a poor job of this wants to keep warm bodies (or not-so-warm ones) on the rolls any way they can.

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