

Editorial: Should we care church membership is down?

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After holding relatively steady for about 50 years, U.S. church membership is diving.

[Gallup](#) first measured U.S. church membership in 1937. From its first measurement until 1985, U.S. church membership ranged from 71 to 76 percent, peaking at the end of World War II. Between 1985 and 1995, church membership bounced up and down between 70 to roughly 62 percent.

After peaking again at 70 percent in 1999, church membership has declined—in every age category—almost year over year and shows no signs of looking back. As of Gallup's last measurement, church membership in 2020 was [47 percent](#) of the U.S. population, the lowest since at least 1937.

Should we care? If church membership is about incarnation and not institution, then, yes, we should.

Lamenting decline

My years as a pastor—and my years in ministry beforehand—taught me the people who care most about church membership are church members. No one else seems to be too worked up about it.

As a former pastor, I know well the handwringing over declines in church membership. To diagnose the problem, the leadership of my congregation discussed the rise of regular attenders who saw no need to become official members of the church. We looked at their financial participation in the

church compared to the financial participation of members, as well as their level of volunteer involvement in the church.

We found that while regular attenders were a double-digit and growing percentage of our congregation, membership made up at least 94 percent of the budget, 50 percent of which was given by senior adults. Some leaders thought if regular attenders became members, they would give more money to the church.

We also found regular attenders often were much more involved in the life of the church than many members. In addition to attending most ministries, many regular attenders also volunteered in everything open to them.

The lamenting I heard then and still hear now about declining church membership too often looks for explanations outside the church. For example: Our culture is secularizing; people are preoccupied with sports or travel; fewer people want to commit to anything.

Each of these and other explanations are a turn away from facing an uncomfortable truth. One reason U.S. church membership is down isn't because people don't care about God, mission or ministry. It's because they don't care about funding our budget or filling our committees.

Nonmembers seem to recognize what some church members may have forgotten. Church membership isn't about maintaining an institution. For those who built these institutions over decades, the idea people no longer exhibit the same kind of stewardship is a bitter pill.

Why we might be concerned

Those who care—and care deeply—about declines in U.S. church membership need to be ready to answer why church membership matters.

Why does church membership matter? Is it so we don't write the same or

smaller number than last year on the Annual Church Profile? Is it so we have enough people to satisfy bylaw requirements for leadership in the church? Is it because members give more money?

Put this way, of course, we would say, “No, that’s not why we’re concerned about membership declines.” But our discussions in staff, committee and business meetings might suggest otherwise.

Does church membership matter because church members take the Bible more seriously, are stronger Christians, or enable churches to do more ministry?

It seems like we should say, “Yes, those are good reasons church membership is important.” If true, they may be good reasons, but they also may be markers of legalism, boasting or attempts to earn God’s favor—in short, still missing the point.

What church membership is

The reason a person should join a church is because Jesus is alive in that group of people.

Where Jesus is alive, abundant joy and faith displaces worry about money and personnel. Compassion leaves no one neglected. Kindness, gentleness and peace radiate in stark contrast to the surrounding world.

Where Jesus is alive, there is truth *and* love. People are submitted to Jesus’ lordship, not preferences. They are united around his teachings, not divided by their understanding of them.

If our church doesn’t look like this, we should be concerned.

Why we should care

Church membership matters when it is a measure of Christ's life within us. People don't have to be convinced to join a church alive in Christ, because his life is contagious and compelling, drawing people unstoppably. Acts 2 and 4 give early testimony of this truth we still know intuitively.

The recent Gallup study, rather than eliciting concern for our institutions, should spark concern about incarnation—the presence of Christ and his Spirit in us—corporately and individually.

And we should respond, not by trying to get people to join our churches, but by seeking Christ first.

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