



A Membership Church or a Discipleship Church

Church bulletins or newsletters often promote participation with the congregation in this fashion: “If you want to become a member of this congregation, either by transfer of membership or by baptism, we invite you to become a part of the Inquirer’s Class that follows the worship service” or, “We invite you to come forward during this hymn of discipleship.” The concept of “membership” in a church body or in a single congregation seems to be a particularly American phenomenon. For church folk, the concept of joining a local congregation grew alongside a membership model that flourished in the 20th century with the rise of civic clubs, boy scouts and girl scouts, sports clubs and the like. Membership is synonymous with belonging to a group, where certain benefits and privileges are granted to that group or certain services are provided to the membership clientele.

Many would argue that this Membership Model has, indeed, taken over much of what was “mainline” Protestantism in the United States. We talk mostly about belonging, not to the body of Christ or even to a particular way of professing Christ via denominational witness, but about belonging to First Church at the corner of Main and Central. Societal values have taught us that we can shop around to find the church that provides just the right goods and services for our particular needs. Our members sometimes stake out pews and claim them as our own. Some treat the pastor as the “hired Christian,” expecting service from that pastor on a 24/7 basis. Some treat stewardship and tithing as payment for service or as dues. And, many congregations have dress and decorum codes for proper attire and behavior while at church. Churches have “business hours” and many are run by the same rules of order and decision-making standardized by government and civic clubs.

While this caricature of a church as a club may not fit the profile of your congregation, the question is worth asking: “Does our church function on a Membership Model or a Discipleship Model?”

Most would agree that the church (or churches) was not founded to serve primarily the interests of people who were already “Christian.” In Matthew 28, Jesus sends the message to Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and then the eleven disciples that their job is to make more disciples. In the text named, “The Great Commission,” Jesus gives the directive to go into all the nations to teach people how to follow in his ways, to tell people the stories of God’s love and redemptive work in the world, to show people how to be disciples of the one named Christ. The directive has very little to do with the comfort of a church that serves the needs of the disciples and everything to do with challenging the disciples to go and meet the needs of people in strange and foreign communities.

Making disciples in Matthew’s gospel just as it is in the other synoptic gospels means actively engaging the world in a way that brings a passion for Jesus’ way, truth and light to communities and cultures and peoples who need them. When Jesus tells his disciples to go into Galilee, he is not so much directing them to specific ministries in specific locales, he is saying go into the world; find out what’s needed in the world beyond what you’ve known. Listen to the people in all their “foreignness” and then figure out how to understand the life-giving identity they can have as fellow disciples.



The Discipleship Model focuses on outward mission rather than internal care-taking. Leaders may stake a course, but the call is to all participants to use their gifts creatively in a way that allows new opportunities for ministry to emerge. The Discipleship Model asks that people get to know the identity, nuanced needs, and “culture” of a neighborhood or community and then mobilize resources to bring the gospel alive in ways that fit. The Discipleship Model asks people to risk the safety and ease of what they’ve known in order to leave a legacy of offering freedom and healing and relief for people in need. The model acknowledges the great fear in taking this risk. It doesn’t promise that there won’t be misguided steps along the way. It doesn’t promise that peril and threat will stay at arm’s length or even that all will make it on this journey. What the Discipleship Model does promise is that Jesus will accompany the congregation on its great commission—even going ahead to stake out the territory. Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism...and instructing them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20, *The Message*, Eugene Petersen)