

# Church Membership in Evangelical Churches

Active Membership, Inactive Membership, Covenantal Commitment, Congregational Care, Discipline, and Polity

## Executive Summary

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Church membership in evangelical churches is more than a name on a roll, a sentimental connection to a congregation, or a voting privilege preserved from the past. Biblically and practically, membership is a public, accountable, covenantal relationship between a believer and a local church. It involves the church's affirmation of a person's profession of faith and the member's commitment to worship, serve, give, grow, submit to pastoral care, participate in congregational life, and live under the loving accountability of the body.

This white paper argues that healthy evangelical churches need to recover **meaningful membership**. A meaningful membership model distinguishes between **active members** and **inactive members**, not merely for administrative cleanliness but for pastoral faithfulness. Inactive membership is not simply a clerical problem; it is a discipleship, care, polity, and discipline issue.

A church that keeps large numbers of inactive members on its rolls may unintentionally distort its identity, weaken pastoral care, complicate congregational decision-making, and diminish the biblical meaning of belonging. A covenantal view of membership helps correct this by clarifying mutual commitments between the church and its members. It also provides a framework for pastoral leadership, congregational care, restorative discipline, and congregational participation.

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 describes a New Testament church as “an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel,” governed under Christ and exercising its God-given responsibilities through the congregation. Similarly, the EFCA states that the true church is manifested in local churches whose membership should be composed only of believers. These evangelical statements reflect a broad conviction: church membership should be regenerate, visible, accountable, and meaningful.

# 1. The Core Question: What Is Church Membership?

Church membership is the recognized relationship between a believer and a local congregation in which the church affirms the person's credible profession of faith and the person commits to the doctrine, fellowship, mission, discipline, and mutual care of that church.

One concise contemporary definition describes church membership as a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian, marked by the church's affirmation and oversight of the Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to live out discipleship within that church's care. That definition is useful because it includes both sides of the relationship: the church receives and shepherds; the member commits and participates.

Biblically, church membership is not presented in the New Testament as a modern administrative category, but the realities behind membership are clearly present. The New Testament assumes identifiable believers gathered in local congregations, recognized leaders, mutual accountability, corporate discipline, shared ordinances, and defined responsibility for one another.

Key biblical foundations include:

**Acts 2:41–47** — Those who received the word were baptized and “added” to the church. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers, generosity, worship, and witness.

**1 Corinthians 12:12–27** — Believers are members of one body, with mutual dependence and responsibility.

**Hebrews 13:17** — Believers are instructed to obey and submit to leaders who keep watch over their souls. This assumes identifiable sheep and accountable shepherds.

**1 Peter 5:1–4** — Elders are called to shepherd the flock “among” them, not an undefined or universal abstraction.

**Matthew 18:15–20** — Jesus gives the church a process for correction and restoration when a professing believer persists in sin.

**1 Corinthians 5** — Paul instructs the church to remove an immoral man from its fellowship, demonstrating that the church knew who was inside and outside its accountable community.

**2 Corinthians 2:6–8** — Discipline aims not at permanent rejection but repentance, forgiveness, comfort, and restoration.

**Ephesians 4:11–16** — Pastoral leadership equips the saints so that the whole body matures and builds itself up in love.

Together, these passages suggest that membership is not merely attendance, affinity, or ancestry. It is belonging with responsibility.

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## 2. Active and Inactive Members

### Active Members

An **active member** is a person who remains meaningfully connected to the life, worship, care, mission, and accountability of the congregation.

Active membership normally includes:

1. **Regular participation in worship**
2. **Identifiable connection to the congregation**
3. **Submission to pastoral care and biblical accountability**
4. **Participation in the ordinances**
5. **Service through gifts, ministry, and mission**
6. **Financial stewardship and generosity**
7. **Relational involvement with the body**
8. **Support of the church's doctrine, covenant, and mission**
9. **Participation in congregational decisions where polity allows**
10. **A pattern of Christian growth and repentance**

Active membership does not mean perfect attendance or constant visibility. Senior adults, homebound members, military personnel, college students, shift workers, caregivers, and those facing health limitations may be active in covenantal commitment even when physically absent. A wise church distinguishes between **providential absence** and **neglectful disengagement**.

### Inactive Members

An **inactive member** is a person who remains on the church roll but no longer participates meaningfully in the worship, fellowship, care, accountability, or mission of the congregation.

Inactive members may include:

1. Members who have joined another church but never transferred membership.
2. Members who moved away and remain disconnected.
3. Members who stopped attending with no explanation.
4. Members who attend occasionally but resist involvement, care, or accountability.
5. Members whose names remain on the roll because of family history or sentiment.
6. Members who are unknown to current pastors, staff, deacons, or ministry leaders.
7. Members who intentionally withdraw from the congregation while retaining voting privileges.

Inactive membership becomes problematic because it separates **membership status** from **discipleship reality**. A person may appear to belong on paper while being absent from the actual life of the body.

One church discipline case involved a church asking members to reaffirm membership based on the church's mission, doctrine, and covenant after recognizing that inactive membership contradicted the New Testament picture of church life. The process included sermons, letters, phone calls, visits, and congregational involvement. The example is useful not because every church should follow the same procedure, but because it shows that membership recovery should be pastoral, patient, communicative, and congregationally clear.

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### **3. Why Inactive Membership Matters**

Inactive membership is not merely an administrative nuisance. It affects the church in several serious ways.

#### **1. It Confuses the Meaning of the Church**

The local church is not a religious mailing list. It is a visible community of baptized believers who gather, worship, serve, witness, and care for one another. When inactive members remain indefinitely on the roll, the church's stated membership no longer reflects its actual congregation.

#### **2. It Weakens Pastoral Care**

Pastors are called to shepherd actual people. Hebrews 13:17 says leaders keep watch over souls as those who will give an account. If the membership roll includes hundreds of people who are absent, unknown, or unreachable, pastoral accountability becomes unclear. The shepherds cannot meaningfully watch over sheep who are administratively present but relationally missing.

#### **3. It Complicates Congregational Polity**

In congregational churches, members may vote on budgets, leadership, property, bylaws, doctrinal matters, pastoral calls, and discipline. If inactive members retain full voting privileges, congregational decisions can be influenced by people who are not meaningfully participating in the church's worship, mission, or spiritual life.

This is especially important in Baptist and other congregational traditions. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 states that each congregation operates under Christ through democratic processes, and the EFCA affirms congregational government while recognizing that it may be lived out differently among churches. Congregational polity assumes spiritually responsible members, not merely registered voters.

#### **4. It Undermines Discipline**

Church discipline requires clarity about who is accountable to the church. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 assume that the church can distinguish between those inside and outside its accountable fellowship. If membership is vague, discipline becomes either impossible or arbitrary.

## **5. It Distorts Ministry Metrics**

Inflated membership rolls may make a church appear larger than it is. This can distort decisions about staffing, budgeting, facilities, pastoral care systems, small groups, deacon ministry, and ministry strategy. A church with 1,200 members and 400 active participants is not shepherded, organized, or led the same way as a church with 1,200 meaningfully active members.

## **6. It Reduces Membership to Sentiment**

Some people remain members because “this is my family’s church,” “I was baptized there,” or “I grew up there.” Those connections may be meaningful, but they are not the same as covenantal participation. Sentiment can honor the past, but it cannot substitute for present discipleship.

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# **4. Covenantal Membership**

## **What Is Covenantal Membership?**

**Covenantal membership** means that church membership is understood as a mutual commitment between the member and the congregation before God. The church receives, shepherds, teaches, disciplines, and equips the member. The member commits to worship, fellowship, serve, give, submit to biblical leadership, pursue holiness, preserve unity, and participate in the mission of the church.

The language of covenant is especially common in Baptist and free church traditions. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 specifically describes the church as “associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.” Similarly, a church covenant can clarify the ethics and responsibilities the congregation intends to uphold and can provide a basis for accountability and discipline.

A church covenant should not function as a legal trap, an authoritarian control mechanism, or a substitute for Scripture. It should be a clear, biblical, pastoral summary of the congregation’s shared commitments.

## **Elements of a Healthy Church Covenant**

A healthy covenant may include commitments to:

1. Confess faith in Jesus Christ.

2. Submit to the authority of Scripture.
3. Pursue personal holiness and repentance.
4. Participate regularly in worship and the ordinances.
5. Support the doctrine and mission of the church.
6. Preserve unity and practice reconciliation.
7. Give generously and serve faithfully.
8. Care for fellow members.
9. Submit to pastoral leadership and congregational accountability.
10. Participate in discipline and restoration.
11. Notify the church when moving, joining another church, or becoming unable to participate.

One practical recommendation from is that churches include covenant language about what members should do when they leave, such as uniting with another church where they can continue living under the principles of God's Word. That kind of language helps prevent membership from becoming indefinite attachment without active participation.

## **Benefits of Covenantal Membership**

Covenantal membership helps a church:

1. Clarify expectations.
2. Strengthen discipleship.
3. Protect congregational unity.
4. Provide a basis for pastoral care.
5. Make discipline more biblical and less arbitrary.
6. Encourage responsible participation in congregational decisions.
7. Help new members understand that joining a church is spiritually significant.
8. Reduce the gap between the church roll and the worshiping body.

## **Risks and Abuses**

Covenantal membership can be misused if handled poorly. Concerns include:

1. Overly intrusive authority.
2. Discipline processes without due care.
3. Legalistic enforcement of preferences.
4. Vague covenant language used inconsistently.
5. Treating membership as institutional control rather than spiritual care.
6. Requiring commitments beyond Scripture.
7. Making resignation or transfer unnecessarily difficult.

Some critics have warned that membership covenants can be abused when they fail to define the parameters of discipline clearly or when they serve primarily as institutional protection rather than pastoral accountability. Churches should take those concerns seriously. A covenant should be biblical, understandable, limited, pastoral, and transparent.

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## 5. Pastoral Leadership and Membership

Pastors are not merely public teachers or organizational executives. They are shepherds. Church membership gives pastoral leadership a defined flock.

### Pastoral Responsibilities Related to Membership

Pastors and elders should:

1. Teach the biblical meaning of church membership.
2. Guard the front door through careful membership processes.
3. Shepherd current members through care and discipleship.
4. Pursue absent members with patience and love.
5. Lead the church in restorative discipline when necessary.
6. Equip deacons, small group leaders, Sunday School leaders, and care teams to assist in member care.
7. Protect the church from both laxity and authoritarianism.
8. Help the congregation understand its own responsibilities.

Biblically, pastors equip the saints for ministry rather than performing all ministry themselves (Ephesians 4:11–16). They shepherd willingly and humbly, not domineering over those in their charge (1 Peter 5:1–4). They keep watch over souls with accountability before God (Hebrews 13:17).

### Pastoral Leadership and the Membership Roll

A church's membership roll should be treated as a shepherding document, not merely a database. Pastors and leaders should be able to answer:

1. Who are our members?
2. Where are they?
3. Are they participating?
4. Are they being cared for?
5. Are they in a group, class, ministry, or care structure?
6. Are any absent, drifting, offended, isolated, or spiritually endangered?
7. Who is responsible to contact them?
8. What process exists for restoration, transfer, or removal?

A bloated or neglected membership roll often reveals an underdeveloped shepherding system.

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## 6. Congregational Care and Membership

Congregational care is the loving practice of knowing, serving, encouraging, correcting, and supporting members of the body.

Membership and care belong together. Without meaningful membership, care becomes reactive and random. With meaningful membership, care can become organized, relational, and accountable.

### Congregational Care Structures

Churches may use different structures, including:

1. Pastor-led care.
2. Deacon family ministry.
3. Small groups or community groups.
4. Adult Bible Fellowships or Sunday School classes.
5. Care teams.
6. Shepherding elders.
7. Congregational care pastors.
8. Member care coordinators.
9. Prayer ministry.
10. Benevolence teams.

The structure may vary, but the principle remains: every member should be known, connected, and cared for.

### Caring for Inactive Members

Inactive members should not be treated first as problems to be removed, but as people to be pursued. A wise process might include:

1. Confirm contact information.
2. Assign a pastor, deacon, group leader, or care team member to reach out.
3. Ask open and pastoral questions.
4. Listen for wounds, transitions, doctrinal concerns, moral struggles, health issues, family burdens, or relational conflicts.
5. Invite restoration when appropriate.
6. Help them transfer membership if they have joined elsewhere.
7. Clarify expectations if they desire to remain members.
8. Move toward removal only after patient, documented, loving pursuit.

The goal is not to clean up records quickly. The goal is to love people truthfully.

### Possible Categories for Membership Care

A church might classify members into pastoral care categories such as:

**Active Resident Members** — regularly involved in worship, groups, ministry, giving, and congregational life.

**Active Nonresident Members** — temporarily away but still connected, such as college students, military personnel, missionaries, or seasonal workers.

**Homebound or Care-Limited Members** — unable to attend regularly because of age, illness, disability, or caregiving responsibilities but still covenantally connected.

**Watchcare Members** — temporarily under the care of the church but not full voting members, depending on polity.

**Inactive Members Under Care** — absent or disconnected but currently being contacted and pursued.

**Inactive Members Pending Removal** — absent after repeated care attempts, unwilling to reconnect, or unreachable after due process.

**Members Under Discipline** — members involved in a formal restorative process because of persistent, unrepentant sin or divisive conduct.

These categories help leaders respond with precision instead of treating all absence the same.

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## 7. Church Discipline and Membership

Church discipline is one of the most misunderstood aspects of membership. Properly understood, discipline is not punishment, embarrassment, or institutional control. It is the church's loving, biblical process of correcting sin, pursuing repentance, protecting the body, honoring Christ, and restoring the sinner when possible.

### Biblical Basis for Discipline

**Matthew 18:15–20** gives a process for confronting sin personally, then with witnesses, then before the church if necessary.

**Galatians 6:1–2** instructs spiritual believers to restore one caught in transgression with gentleness.

**1 Corinthians 5** shows that public, unrepentant sin may require removal from fellowship.

**2 Corinthians 2:6–8** shows that repentance should be met with forgiveness, comfort, and restoration.

**Titus 3:10–11** addresses divisive persons after repeated warnings.

**2 Thessalonians 3:6–15** addresses disorderly conduct while warning the church not to treat the person as an enemy but as a brother.

**1 Timothy 5:19–20** gives special caution regarding accusations against elders.

## **Discipline and Inactive Membership**

Should chronic nonattendance be treated as a discipline issue?

Evangelicals differ. Some would say yes, because persistent abandonment of the church violates the member's covenant and the New Testament command not to neglect assembling together (Hebrews 10:24–25). Others would distinguish between discipline for moral scandal and administrative removal for nonparticipation. A balanced approach recognizes that chronic, unrepentant neglect of the church is spiritually serious, but the response should be pastoral, patient, and proportionate.

Several possible approaches exist:

### **Position 1: Inactivity as Administrative Removal**

Some churches treat inactivity primarily as an administrative matter. After repeated attempts at contact, the church removes the person from membership because the person is no longer meaningfully connected. This approach is often used when the member has moved, joined elsewhere, or become unreachable.

#### **Strengths:**

It avoids unnecessarily severe language. It keeps rolls accurate. It works well for unreachable or relocated members.

#### **Weaknesses:**

It may understate the spiritual seriousness of forsaking the body. It can become bureaucratic if not connected to pastoral pursuit.

### **Position 2: Inactivity as Covenant Violation Requiring Discipline**

Other churches treat persistent nonattendance and refusal to reconnect as a matter of church discipline. This view argues that membership includes covenant obligations, and knowingly abandoning the church is a failure of discipleship.

**Strengths:**

It takes membership seriously. It emphasizes accountability and the biblical command to gather.

**Weaknesses:**

It can sound harsh if applied without careful distinction between neglect, providential absence, wounds, illness, or relocation.

**Position 3: Inactivity as a Pastoral Care Process That May Lead to Removal**

This is often the wisest practical approach. The church begins with care, not discipline. If the member responds, the church pursues restoration, transfer, or clarification. If the member refuses accountability, rejects the church, or remains unreachable after repeated efforts, the church may remove the person from membership either by administrative action or congregational discipline, depending on the church's bylaws and theological convictions.

**Strengths:**

It is pastoral, patient, and clear. It allows different causes of absence to be handled differently. It avoids both neglect and harshness.

**Weaknesses:**

It requires careful systems, communication, documentation, and leadership courage.

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## 8. Congregational Polity and Membership

Polity significantly affects how a church understands and practices membership.

### Congregational Polity

In congregational churches, the congregation is the final earthly authority under Christ for major church decisions. This is common in Baptist, Bible church, many evangelical free, and some independent churches.

The EFCA describes its churches as autonomous but interdependent congregations of like faith and congregational government, and notes that strong pastoral leadership together with discerning, well-equipped lay people can produce spiritual and church growth. The Baptist Faith and Message likewise describes the local church as autonomous and operating under Christ through democratic processes.

In congregational polity, membership matters because members are not merely attenders. They are participants in congregational discernment. Therefore, churches must ask:

1. Who may vote?
2. Should inactive members vote?

3. What level of participation is required for congregational decisions?
4. Should membership be reaffirmed periodically?
5. How are members removed?
6. Who recommends discipline?
7. Does the congregation act on discipline cases?
8. How do pastors lead without bypassing the congregation?

## **Elder-Led Congregationalism**

Many evangelical churches practice elder-led congregationalism. In this model, pastors or elders lead, teach, recommend, shepherd, and oversee, while the congregation retains final responsibility for major decisions.

This model seeks to hold together Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:1–4, Acts 6:1–6, Matthew 18:17, and 1 Corinthians 5. Leaders lead; the congregation participates. Pastors do not merely poll the people; neither do they rule as detached executives. The congregation does not micromanage every ministry decision; neither does it surrender its responsibility under Christ.

## **Elder Rule or Presbyterian-Like Polity**

Some evangelical churches give elders final governing authority over membership, discipline, and leadership decisions. In such churches, members may affirm leaders and participate in ministry, but the elders make many final decisions.

### **Strengths:**

It can provide clarity, speed, theological consistency, and shepherding oversight.

### **Weaknesses:**

If not carefully guarded, it can minimize congregational responsibility and create distance between leaders and members.

## **Episcopal or Connectional Polity**

In episcopal or connectional traditions, membership may be shaped by denominational structures, bishops, conferences, or external authorities. Local church membership remains meaningful, but final authority may not rest solely in the local congregation.

### **Strengths:**

It can provide accountability beyond the local church, doctrinal continuity, and broader care.

### **Weaknesses:**

It may reduce local congregational ownership of membership and discipline.

## **Polity and Inactive Membership**

The more congregational the polity, the more urgent it becomes to maintain meaningful membership. Inactive members in a congregational church may retain authority without responsibility. That creates a polity problem, not merely a pastoral care problem.

A congregational church should consider whether inactive members may:

1. Vote on budgets.
2. Vote on pastors.
3. Vote on property decisions.
4. Vote on bylaw changes.
5. Vote on discipline matters.
6. Serve in leadership.
7. Teach or lead groups.
8. Hold office.

A common policy solution is to distinguish between **membership status** and **voting eligibility**. For example, only active members in good standing may vote, teach, lead, or hold office. Inactive members may remain under care for a defined period but not exercise congregational authority.

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## 9. Biblical Support for Different Positions

Evangelical churches do not all apply membership principles identically. Below are several positions and their biblical arguments.

### Position A: Formal Membership Is Biblically Necessary

This position argues that formal church membership is the best way to obey New Testament commands regarding shepherding, accountability, discipline, ordinances, and mutual care.

#### Biblical support:

- Acts 2:41 — believers were “added.”
- Acts 6:1–6 — the church identified its people and selected representatives.
- 1 Corinthians 5:12–13 — the church distinguished those inside from those outside.
- Hebrews 13:17 — leaders watch over identifiable souls.
- 1 Peter 5:2 — elders shepherd the flock among them.
- Matthew 18:17 — unresolved sin is told to the church.
- 1 Corinthians 12 — believers belong to one another as members of a body.

#### Strength:

This position gives strong practical expression to the New Testament’s assumptions.

**Concern:**

The New Testament does not provide a detailed membership manual, so churches should avoid treating every local membership procedure as directly commanded by Scripture.

**Position B: Membership Is Biblical but Should Remain Simple**

This position affirms membership but resists complex covenant documents, extensive classes, or formalized discipline processes beyond what Scripture clearly teaches.

**Biblical support:**

- Romans 10:9–13 — salvation is by faith in Christ, not institutional process.
- Acts 2:41 — baptism and addition appear immediate.
- Galatians 5:1 — churches should avoid adding burdensome requirements.
- Romans 14:1 — believers should be welcomed without quarreling over opinions.

**Strength:**

This position protects the simplicity of the gospel and avoids institutional overreach.

**Concern:**

If too informal, membership may become unclear, weak, or functionally meaningless.

**Position C: Covenantal Membership Is the Healthiest Expression**

This position argues that membership should be covenantal because the church is a committed body of believers who share doctrine, mission, accountability, and care.

**Biblical support:**

- Acts 2:42–47 — the church devoted itself to shared practices.
- Ephesians 4:1–16 — the body grows through committed participation.
- Colossians 3:12–17 — believers live in covenant-like community marked by forgiveness, love, and teaching.
- Hebrews 10:24–25 — believers stir one another up and do not neglect gathering.
- John 13:34–35 — love among disciples visibly testifies to Christ.

**Strength:**

This position clarifies mutual expectations and supports meaningful discipleship.

**Concern:**

Covenant language must remain biblical and pastoral, not coercive or overly broad.

**Position D: Membership Should Be Regenerate and Baptized**

This position, common among Baptists and many free churches, teaches that local church membership should be limited to those who credibly profess faith in Christ and have been baptized as believers or according to the church's baptismal convictions.

**Biblical support:**

- Acts 2:41 — those who received the word were baptized and added.
- Matthew 28:19–20 — disciples are baptized and taught to obey Christ.
- Romans 6:1–4 — baptism identifies believers with Christ's death and resurrection.
- 1 Corinthians 1:2 — the church is addressed as those sanctified in Christ Jesus.

The EFCA states that membership in local churches should be composed only of believers. The Baptist Faith and Message describes the local church as a congregation of baptized believers.

**Strength:**

It preserves the visible church as a confessing community.

**Concern:**

Churches must handle children, youth, baptism differences, and transfers with theological clarity and pastoral sensitivity.

**Position E: Membership Should Include Discipline and Restoration**

This position argues that membership without discipline is incomplete because the church cannot affirm discipleship without also correcting destructive sin.

**Biblical support:**

- Matthew 18:15–20 — Jesus gives a process for correction.
- 1 Corinthians 5 — the church must remove the unrepentant immoral person.
- Galatians 6:1 — restoration should be gentle.
- 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 — repentance should be met with forgiveness and comfort.
- Titus 3:10 — divisiveness requires warning and eventual separation.

A Southern Baptist exposition of the Baptist Faith and Message explains that covenant fellowship implies discipline, including admitting those who credibly profess faith, correcting those who stray, excluding those who refuse loving entreaties, and restoring the repentant.

**Strength:**

It reflects the Bible's concern for holiness, restoration, and witness.

**Concern:**

Discipline must be conducted with humility, due process, documentation, confidentiality, and pastoral love.

# **10. Practical Recommendations for Evangelical Churches**

## **1. Define Membership Theologically**

Churches should define membership in their bylaws, membership class, covenant, and preaching. A possible definition:

Church membership is a covenantal relationship between a baptized believer and a local congregation in which the church affirms the believer's profession of faith, receives the believer into its fellowship and care, and the believer commits to worship, serve, give, grow, preserve unity, submit to biblical leadership, participate in the church's mission, and live under the loving accountability of the body.

## **2. Clarify Active Membership**

A church should define active membership in measurable but pastoral terms. For example:

Active members are members in good standing who regularly participate in worship, remain relationally connected to the church, support its doctrine and mission, submit to its pastoral care, and fulfill the responsibilities described in the church covenant.

## **3. Create a Pastoral Category for Inactive Members**

Inactive members should not immediately be erased. They should be pursued.

A possible definition:

Inactive members are members who, without providential hindrance, have ceased regular participation in the worship, fellowship, care, and mission of the church for a defined period of time.

The church may define the period as six months, twelve months, or another appropriate timeframe.

## **4. Distinguish Inactive from Homebound or Providentially Hindered**

Do not classify faithful but homebound members as inactive in the same sense as disengaged members. A homebound saint may be deeply active in prayer, giving, encouragement, and covenantal affection.

## **5. Limit Voting to Active Members in Good Standing**

In congregational churches, voting should normally be limited to active members in good standing. This protects congregational discernment from being shaped by those who are not participating in the body's life.

## **6. Require Membership Orientation**

A membership class should explain:

1. The gospel.
2. Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
3. The church's doctrine.
4. The church covenant.
5. Expectations of members.
6. Pastoral care structures.
7. Church discipline.
8. Polity and voting.
9. Ministry involvement.
10. Process for transfer or resignation.

## **7. Use Membership Interviews**

A membership interview allows leaders to hear a person's testimony, clarify baptism, answer questions, explain expectations, and begin pastoral relationship.

## **8. Reaffirm the Covenant Periodically**

Churches may ask members to reaffirm the covenant annually or during a membership renewal season. This should not feel like signing a contract every year but like renewing shared commitment.

## **9. Conduct Regular Roll Review**

At least annually, leaders should review the membership roll and classify members for care:

- Active
- Homebound
- Temporarily away
- Needs contact
- Under care
- Pending transfer
- Pending removal
- Under discipline

## **10. Develop a Restoration-Oriented Discipline Policy**

The policy should include:

1. Biblical basis.
2. Goals of discipline.

3. Informal correction.
4. Formal process.
5. Role of pastors/elders/deacons.
6. Role of congregation.
7. Confidentiality expectations.
8. Documentation.
9. Restoration process.
10. Appeal or review process where appropriate.

## **11. Communicate Clearly and Repeatedly**

A church should teach membership before enforcing membership expectations. Many inactive members are products of years of unclear teaching. Churches should lead patiently.

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## **11. Suggested Membership Policy Framework**

A church could adopt a membership framework like this:

### **A. Reception into Membership**

Persons may be received into membership by:

1. Profession of faith and baptism.
2. Transfer from a church of like faith and order.
3. Statement of prior conversion and baptism.
4. Restoration.

### **B. Responsibilities of Members**

Members commit to:

1. Worship regularly.
2. Participate in the ordinances.
3. Grow as disciples.
4. Preserve unity.
5. Serve according to giftedness.
6. Give faithfully.
7. Participate in congregational care.
8. Submit to biblical leadership.
9. Support the church's doctrine and mission.
10. Practice reconciliation and accountability.

### **C. Active Members**

Active members are eligible to vote, serve in leadership, teach, and hold office, subject to the church's qualifications.

## **D. Inactive Members**

Members may be designated inactive after a defined period of nonparticipation without providential reason. Inactive members should receive pastoral contact and opportunity for restoration.

## **E. Removal from Membership**

Members may be removed by:

1. Death.
2. Transfer to another church.
3. Written request.
4. Joining another church.
5. Persistent inactivity after pastoral pursuit.
6. Church discipline.
7. Doctrinal departure.
8. Relocation with no continuing connection.
9. Unreachability after reasonable effort.

## **F. Restoration**

Removed members may be restored upon repentance, renewed participation, and reaffirmation of the church's doctrine and covenant.

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# **12. A Pastoral Process for Addressing Inactive Membership**

A church recovering meaningful membership should move slowly and pastorally.

### **Phase 1: Teach**

Preach and teach on the church, membership, covenant, care, and discipline.

### **Phase 2: Audit**

Review the membership roll. Identify active, inactive, homebound, moved, unknown, and deceased members.

### **Phase 3: Contact**

Use letters, calls, texts, email, visits, and personal networks. Ask: “How are you? Are you connected to another church? How can we care for you? Do you desire to remain a member?”

#### **Phase 4: Classify**

Place each person in an appropriate care category.

#### **Phase 5: Restore or Transfer**

Encourage inactive members to return, join a church near them, transfer membership, or clarify their status.

#### **Phase 6: Recommend Action**

After repeated care attempts, leaders may recommend removal for those who are unreachable, unwilling to participate, or no longer aligned with the church.

#### **Phase 7: Congregational Action**

In congregational polity, the church may need to vote on membership removal according to its bylaws.

#### **Phase 8: Continue Care**

Even after removal, the church should leave the door open for repentance, restoration, and renewed fellowship.

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## **13. Key Tensions Churches Must Navigate**

### **Grace and Accountability**

Membership must be gracious without becoming meaningless. Accountability must be serious without becoming harsh.

### **Pastoral Leadership and Congregational Authority**

Pastors should lead the church toward biblical faithfulness, but in congregational polity, the congregation must own its responsibility.

### **Care and Discipline**

Discipline should arise from care. If a church only contacts inactive members when it wants to remove them, the process will feel administrative rather than pastoral.

## **Covenant and Conscience**

A church covenant should clarify biblical expectations but not bind consciences beyond Scripture.

## **Inclusion and Regenerate Membership**

The church should be welcoming to seekers, guests, and unbelievers while maintaining membership as a covenant of believers.

## **Sentiment and Discipleship**

Long family history with a church should be honored, but it should not replace active discipleship.

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# **14. Conclusion**

Church membership is one of the most important and most neglected issues in evangelical church life. When membership is reduced to a roll, churches lose clarity about who they are, whom they shepherd, who may lead, who may vote, and who is accountable to whom. When membership is recovered as a covenantal relationship, the church becomes more faithful, more honest, more caring, and more biblically ordered.

The difference between active and inactive members is not merely attendance. It is the difference between meaningful participation in the body and disconnected status on a list. Churches should pursue inactive members with patience, love, and clarity. Some will be restored. Some will transfer. Some will need to be removed. All should be treated as people, not paperwork.

Covenantal membership provides a healthy framework for belonging, care, accountability, discipline, and mission. Pastoral leadership gives direction to this process. Congregational care gives it relational warmth. Church discipline gives it moral seriousness. Congregational polity gives it shared responsibility.

A church's membership roll should tell the truth. It should reflect a people who have been saved by Christ, baptized into visible fellowship, gathered under the Word, committed to one another, accountable in love, and sent together on mission.

A healthy church does not ask merely, "How many members do we have?" It asks, "Who are we shepherding, who is walking with us, who is drifting, who needs care, and how faithfully are we helping one another follow Jesus?"

