Membership: Active and Inactive

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Lifestyle or Label?

Dallas Willard, one of the foremost authors on discipleship, opens the first chapter of his book entitled *The Great Omission* with these words:

The word “disciple” occurs 269 times in the New Testament. “Christian” is found three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to disciples of Jesus – in a situation where it was no longer possible to regard them as a sect of the Jews (Acts 11:26). The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ. For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership – either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or local church. I would be glad to learn of any exception to this claim, but it would only serve to highlight its general validity and make the general rule more glaring. So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, *discipleship clearly is optional.*

Ouch!

Willard’s argument, at its most basic level, is that the contemporary American church has abandoned the *lifestyle* of being a “follower of Christ” and settled for the *label* “Christian.” Willard isn’t the only person to recognize this, of course. As a matter of fact, I’d be surprised if most of us, in our most honest moments, didn’t admit to similar thoughts.

My best guess is that it goes back to the early American revivals. Somewhere amidst the several Great Awakenings, American Christians began believing that Christianity was predominantly about a “decision” or a “conversion.” We started to understand the faith as a religion based on “getting saved” or “going to heaven.” During this period, traveling preachers famously held revival meetings where dozens, sometimes hundreds, of people were led through a conversion (or re-conversion) process. Whether they admitted it or not, numbers were the goal. The success of such meetings was (and continues to be) the quantity of people who claim they’ve made “a decision for Christ.”

The problem was, the local religious infrastructure to deal with all of these new converts was often either failing or nonexistent. Ministers (if there were any) weren’t prepared to deal with the influx of so many people who knew so little about the faith, and congregations weren’t prepared to welcome these (often disturbingly familiar) people into their midst merely because they claimed to have had an experience of God’s grace.

Institutional failures were not the only problem or even, perhaps, the biggest problem. Even more destructive was the fact that people actually believed the preaching they heard at these revival meetings. Preachers told them they were saved; they were going to heaven; they didn’t have to worry about hell; God loved them. (All of which was true, of course!) However, these
same preachers seldom bothered to teach their audiences that, in thankful response for their salvation, God expected discipleship.

Before long, Christianity became a religion primarily about conversion to a heavenly eternity rather than to an ongoing discipleship within God’s kingdom.

To be fair, even though we perfected “conversion-only” Christianity, we cannot claim to have invented it. It has been a problem since biblical times. The scandalously extreme nature of God’s grace has always been followed with the intense temptation to ignore the only appropriate human response to that free grace: faithfulness. Yet the church has continued to fight that temptation diligently—or have we?

It is an important question. If Christianity is merely a religion of conversion, why bother with worship? Why have churches? Why bother raising our children in the faith? If Christianity is merely a religion intent on getting the hoards “saved,” why waste time and resources on those who have already converted or those who never will? The answer, of course, is that Christianity is not merely a conversion religion; it is a discipleship religion. To be “Christian” is to be a student (discipulus) of Christ’s teachings—one who increasingly learns how to live as Jesus lived and according to the priorities Jesus taught.

This is where the proverbial rubber hits the road. Discipleship is not accidental. It takes intent and conviction; it takes time and attention. That is what I’d like to leave you thinking about: Are you being intentional about discipleship?

I know time is limited and life is busy. You’ll notice I’m not suggesting you spend two hours in prayer and three hours reading the Bible each day or that we start a daily worship service at church (although neither is historically unheard of!)

The question is far more basic than that: Are you intentional about learning how to live as Jesus lived? Are you a disciple?

If you’d like to talk about discipleship or if you need help finding resources, let me know!
Let me be clear: I do not like the term “membership” when used in reference to churches. Of course, I cannot do anything about it: it is the term the Book of Church Order uses, and it has become such a part of our culture that we’re probably past the point of being able to change it. Regardless, I truly believe it to be an awful word for the concept it’s intended to express.

My dissatisfaction with the use of the word “member” is because it is a term typically used to indicate one’s privileges within an exclusive group like a club, lodge, society, or sorority. As wonderful as these kinds of groups can be, membership within them is primarily about privilege. Membership gives one the ability to demand something from the group. A member of a yacht club, for example, can expect the privilege of renting a slip or using the clubhouse; a member of a sorority can expect the privilege of attending private functions. While the specific requirements for membership in groups may vary, they are typically intended to draw a clear line between those who are “in” and those who do not belong.

Membership in the church is different. One does not “pledge” into the church nor pay yearly dues to belong. One need not be a member to be considered a “Christian”; on the other hand, neither does membership suggest the ability to expect any kind of eternal perks. Membership in the church is about a relationship with Christ and his people, and a commitment to God’s kingdom.

All of which raises the questions: What is membership? Why bother?

What is Church Membership?

We could say a lot about the theology of membership or the doctrine of ecclesiology, but in the end, it seems the question of what membership is might best be answered by looking at the vows people take when they “join.” Membership in the church demands a fourfold commitment: (1) a rejection of evil, (2) a profession of faith in Jesus, (3) a commitment to worship and service, and (4) an acceptance of the church’s guidance while living out a communal commitment to unity, purity, and peace. (For the exact wording, see the RCA’s “Order for Profession of Faith.”) Interestingly, none of these four commitments are merely matters of the past. Each of them is a promise that must be renewed on a regular—perhaps daily—basis. In other words, church membership is not something we “did”; it is something we keep doing. As members of Christ’s church (both locally and globally), we daily recommit ourselves to reject evil. We daily recommit ourselves to Jesus’ lordship, we daily recommit ourselves to worship and service in the church, and we daily recommit ourselves to a life of unity, purity, and peace in loving community with one another.

Why Bother?

There are many reasons I believe church membership is a good thing. First and foremost, I believe it is both important and beneficial that we make these commitments publicly. Private commitments are wonderful, but our public commitments make greater demands on our integrity—when we publically embrace the fourfold membership commitment, we give ourselves an extra incentive to remain faithful to them.
Secondly, our commitment to Christ and the church is reciprocated by a powerful promise offered in return: The church promises to “love, encourage, and support [us] by teaching the gospel of God’s love, by being an example of Christian faith and character, and by giving the strong support of God’s family in fellowship, prayer, and service.”

In a wonderfully circular way, our commitments become the support and encouragement other people need to be faithful, and their commitments become the support and encouragement we need.

It’s worth noting that we all fail. Each of us grows lax in our own commitments at times, and the church, at times, fails to adequately love, encourage, and support us. Alexander Pope’s words are truly appropriate here: to err is human, to forgive is divine. Yes, we all fail, but divine forgiveness is granted freely to each of us (and through each of us to one another) in order that those failures would become increasingly temporary and decreasingly frequent.

If you are already a member of __________________ Reformed Church, how faithfully are you living into your membership commitments? If you are not yet a member, please consider joining us—it may be exactly the support you need. In either case, if you have any questions, give me a call or drop me an email; I’d love to talk with you!
Inactive: What is it?

The previous section discusses what it means to be a “member” of the church. In short, I suggested that being a member means living into the vows we take when we make profession of faith, specifically the four-fold commitment to: (1) a rejection of evil, (2) a profession of faith in Jesus, (3) a commitment to worship and service, and (4) an acceptance of the church’s guidance while living out a communal commitment to unity, purity, and peace. Membership is a fairly simple concept—we promised to do something and we do it. The reality is, however, that there are times when we don’t do what we said we would. In the Reformed Church we call that being “inactive.”

“Inactive” is a word that in almost any other context is a completely neutral concept. An inactive nurse is simply a nurse who isn’t practicing. An inactive member of a club is someone who doesn’t participate in the activities of that club. Most organizations have an “inactive” status and, although they’d prefer people were active, they understand that sometimes the demands of life don’t allow for full participation. To be “inactive” does not make someone “bad” or a failure. It is simply an honest categorization of those who are not, for whatever reason, currently active.

We need to be clear: membership in the church is different from membership in other organizations. Church membership is a public commitment to live in community with God’s people and participate in the life and ministry of a local congregation. Fellowship and ministry are not “extracurricular” aspects of Christianity; they are fundamental to the faith. This is why “inactive” is often seen as a negative or judgmental designation within the church. Indeed, there are rare but appropriate times when the elders of a congregation are called to make someone inactive as a matter of discipline.

Generally speaking, though, the designation of “inactive,” like in other organizations, is nothing more than an honest categorization of those who are not, for whatever reason, currently active. We read about this in the Book of Church Order, which requires the board of elders to “place on the inactive list the name of any confessing member whose relationship with the church has ceased for one year or who for one year has not made faithful use of the means of grace” (BCO 1.1.5.2d). In other words, the elders are expected to look at the membership list every year and designate those who are “inactive.” The hope, of course, is that people will renew their active connection with the church. As a matter of fact, the BCO continues in the same paragraph by saying that the elders “shall seek diligently… to recover that member.”

Unfortunately, there is no convenient way to deal with the deep tension between the realization that a number of our members are not “active” (and the BCO requires the elders to make those members inactive) and the concern that doing so will be seen as judgmental (which is not intended!). Your elders are doing their best to find a way to honor the requirements of our order while doing so in a way that is wise, gracious, and non-judgmental.

As always, if you would like to discuss this with me further, please let me know.
Active, Inactive, and Whatnot: A Working Document for Elders

Few things inject conflict and discomfort more quickly into the life of a congregation than discussions around membership. Who should be considered active? Who should be made inactive? What do those categories really mean? What difference does it make? Why bother? For the sake of convenience, I’m going to take them out of order:

Why bother worrying about membership?
We bother because it’s part of our responsibility as a congregation within the Reformed Church in America. The Book of Church Order requires us to maintain a list of our “members.” It also requires that the elders make people “inactive” if their “relationship with the church has ceased for one year” or if they have not “made faithful use of the means of grace” (hearing the Word and partaking of the Lord’s Supper) (BCO 1.1.5.2.d). We maintain a membership list and move people to an inactive list because we’re required to according to the Book of Church Order.

We also bother with membership because it is a two-way street. Membership involves committing oneself to the life and ministry of the church; membership also involves the church’s commitment to her members. We cannot expect the Jane Doe on the street to have any concern about the wellbeing of the church. At the same time, the church cannot know and fully care for all people. Membership is a commitment to the life and ministry of the church and a commitment from the church to care for us.

What difference does it make?
At the most basic level, the number of people we hold on our membership roles determines our financial responsibility to the classis, regional synod, and general synod. We pay just under $80 in assessments for every member ($7.37 to the classis [Rochester], $27.50 to our regional synod [Albany], and $44 to the General Synod [2011 figures]). It’s important to remember that assessments are not dues. We don’t pay assessments merely for the privilege of belonging to the RCA! Assessments are part of the way that we support and encourage the ongoing ministry of Christ’s church. Just as individuals are called to give generously of their time and resources to support the ministry of a local congregation, so too, congregations are called to give of their time and resources to sustain the ministries of the classis, regional synod, and General Synod. Our congregation [Pultneyville Reformed Church] is responsible to the larger church for $78.24 per member. This means our assessment responsibility for 2011 is $12,831.

What do the membership categories mean?
There are three basic membership categories in the RCA: confessing members (often called active members), inactive members, and baptized members (BCO Preamble). Confessing members are all those who have been received into the membership of a local congregation by the elders and make faithful use of the means of grace. Inactive members are those who used to be confessing members, but who no longer remain active in the life and ministry of the church. (The hope is always that “inactive” is a temporary status—individuals are easily and joyfully returned to “active” if they reengage in the life and ministry of the congregation.) Baptized members include all who have received the sacrament of baptism within a local congregation.
There is also a fourth category: adherents. Adherents “participate in the life, work, and worship of the church, but are not members.” Membership categories are shorthand for defining the relationship and commitments between individuals and the church.

Who should be considered “active”?
The Book of Church Order does not give a clear definition of “active.” It assumes an active commitment on the part of all members. Unfortunately, that isn’t always a reality. At the very least, four things are required of an active member: (1) baptism and reception into membership by the elders, (2 and 3) making faithful use of the means of grace, especially hearing the Word and partaking of the Lord’s Supper, and (4) engagement of the vows and commitments made upon professing our faith (see the second section of this resource, “Membership: A Horrible Word for an Important Concept”). Active members are those who regularly participate in worship, use their gifts in ministry, and seek to live faithfully as members of the community.

Who should be made inactive?
Inactive is an often-misunderstood category. The fact of the matter is this: inactive is simply a category for those who are not “active” (see above). In the RCA, elders “shall” place any member on the inactive list whose “relationship with the church has ceased for one year or who for one year has not made faithful use of the means of grace” (BCO 1.1.5.2.d). Technically speaking, unless there are extenuating circumstances, the elders are therefore required to do so. If the elders make someone inactive, the BCO indicates that the elders are to notify them of the action and “seek diligently for an additional period of one year to recover that member.” (Remember, although it doesn’t always turn out optimistically, the hope is always for “inactive” to be a temporary status.) It is also acceptable for someone who recognizes their unwillingness to be “active” to request inactive status. In either case, any member can be returned to “active” by a simple vote of the elders whenever they desire to rejoin the life and ministry of the congregation. Confessing members who are unable (or unwilling) to be “active” can (and “shall”) be made inactive by the Elders; the hope is always that they will eventually become active again.

What does this look like in practice?
Neither the Bible nor the Book of Church Order give us very many specifics as to exactly how elders are supposed to handle issues of membership—the expectation is merely that they will do so wisely and in a way that reflects good order.

The key question, in my mind, is how we define “active” and when the elders are to take the action of making someone “inactive.” Several situations are simple:

- The elders would want to comply with a request to be made inactive. (Hoping, of course, that the individual will change their mind in the future.)
- It is reasonable and acceptable to make someone inactive who no longer lives in the community and is not expected to return in the near future. (Hoping, of course, that the individual will join with a congregation in their new community and request a transfer of membership.)
• The elders would *not* want to make someone inactive whose participation is limited due to poor health. (These are people the church has the responsibility to continue to care for!)

Some situations are more difficult. I would suggest that “Active” is defined simply as “members who worship with the congregation regularly, and give of their time and finances regularly.” For the sake of argument, I would define regularly as more than once a month.

It seems obvious to me (perhaps this is where the discussion lies!) that anyone who does not worship with us or give or their time and finances at least once a month is not truly “active.” They may have been active in the past; they may be active in the future (we certainly hope so and should be willing to do whatever we can to facilitate it!). But, for the time being, they are currently “inactive.”

Here’s an idea of how to handle the process of updating “active” and “inactive” members:

• In January we suggest inactive members self-request inactive status. The best case scenario would be to suggest people request inactive status if they are unable (or unwilling) to meet the expectations of an active member and for us to promise that we will continue to pray for them, continue to consider them part of the community, continue to do our best to care for them, and continue to look forward to the time when they once again become active. Of course, I’d also suggest that we assure them that this is not punitive or disciplinary and that we will eagerly make them active again when they desire it.

• In March, elders contact those on their care lists who are not truly active and discuss their inactivity, hoping they will become active. If they are unable (or unwilling), the elders suggest they request inactive status.

• In June, elders contact those on their care lists who are not truly active and again discuss their inactivity, hoping they will become active. We again offer them the opportunity to request inactive status. We inform them that we will be making them inactive in August if nothing changes but promise them that we will continue to pray for them, continue to consider them part of the community, continue to do our best to care for them, and continue to look forward to the time when they once again become active. We also assure them that making them inactive does not mean that we think they’re “bad people,” “not Christian,” or anything else, merely that they are currently not active and that we will eagerly make them active again whenever that changes.
Sample Letter Introducing Membership Status Changes

Dear Friends and Members of Pultneyville Reformed Church,

Greetings! We hope this letter comes on the heels of a joyful holiday season and that your new year is one of great blessings.

As you may know, the board of elders has the responsibility for supervising all aspects of our congregation’s ministry. We have been spending a lot of time in thought, discussion, and prayer over the past months related to how we can engage that responsibility in a way that (1) reflects our desire to help each of you grow and develop in Christian faithfulness, (2) encourages and equips each of you to participate in the life and ministry of Pultneyville, (3) seeks to re-engage those who have become less involved in recent times, and (4) fulfills the responsibilities given to the board of elders by the Book of Church Order with as much grace and integrity as possible.

We deeply desire to help you grow and develop in matters of Christian faithfulness.

The elders have been working through a book entitled *The Great Omission*, by Dallas Willard. Willard notes that discipleship is an essential (although often ignored) part of the Christian faith. Indeed, “nothing less than life in the steps of Christ is adequate to the human soul or the needs of our world” (11). We agree. We want to help you grow and become increasingly faithful disciples of Christ! In light of this, you’ll notice there are many opportunities each week at Pultneyville Reformed Church to help you with this! We would love to see you join the adult Sunday school class or the Wednesday morning Bible study. If you would like to join Pultneyville (or just learn more about the congregation) you might consider taking the upcoming new members’ class; for parents interested in having their children baptized, we’re now offering a baptism class as well. There are many ways for you to facilitate a breath of fresh air in your spiritual life each week. We’d particularly like to encourage you to consider joining us for the one-day “Walk Thru the Old Testament” seminar on Saturday, March 5, 2010. We’re bringing in a special instructor who will “walk” us through the entire Old Testament in just seven hours. It will be a fun and engaging day for ages 12 to 112!

Please do not hesitate to let us know if you have other ideas or thoughts on how we can help the congregation grow in faith and foster deeper discipleship.

We truly want you to participate in the life and ministry of Pultneyville.

We also believe that participation in the life and ministry of the church is an important part of faithfulness. While each of our time, resources, and abilities vary dramatically, there are many ways for *all* of us to participate in the life and ministry of the church. Have you considered helping one of the youth groups or teaching Sunday school? Perhaps you have a week of vacation you could use for our upcoming mission trip. How about being a liturgist? (We’ll be offering another training soon.) We also have a variety of ministry teams and committees; one of them might be the perfect fit for you. If the options are overwhelming, please let us know and we’ll help you figure out what is the best fit for you.
Some of you haven’t been around much—we’d like to see more of you!
Don’t worry, we’re not taking attendance on Sunday mornings; on the other hand, we’ve noticed that some of you haven’t been around much lately. We understand that there are many reasons for that—some of you have to work on Sundays, others of you have moved out of the community or are worshiping with other churches. We all have seasons in our lives that are busier than others. If you’re unable to worship with us every week, please consider joining us as often as you can. If you just haven’t “gotten around to it,” now is as good a time as any! Worship is still at 10:00 a.m. every Sunday, followed by Sunday school for all ages. If you’re attending somewhere else, please let us know so we can send them your transfer papers.

As a board of elders, sometimes we have to make difficult decisions.
We have experienced a great amount of transition over the past few years, and because of that we have not done anything with the “active members” list in a long time. However, it is our responsibility to “place on the inactive list the name of any confessing member whose relationship with the church has ceased for one year or who for one year has not made faithful use of the means of grace…” (Book of Church Order, 1.I.5.2d). While we understand that it is impossible to define “active” and “inactive” in a way that will make everyone happy, we hope and pray that you will find our interpretation of the Book of Church Order both reasonable and gracious. At our upcoming January meeting, we will be going through our membership lists and defining as “active” anyone who: (1) attends worship at Pultneyville regularly, and (2) gives of their time and resources regularly at Pultneyville. As required, unless there are extenuating circumstances for non-involvement, we will place those who have not done those two things for a year or longer on the “inactive” list. You will receive a letter in February informing you of the results of our January meeting.

Please understand that we do not view “inactive” as a punitive, derogatory, or permanent status; we are using these terms solely as a description of current involvement in the life and ministry of this congregation. We are eager to facilitate the re-involvement of all on the inactive list and look forward to being able to return many to active participation in the life of the church as quickly as possible!

As always, please speak with us directly with any questions or concerns you may have; please also share with us your joys and dreams in order that we may truly “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep [and] live in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:15-16a).

Grace and peace to you,

Your board of elders
Sample Letter to Active Members

Dear Members,

About a month ago, you should have received a letter from the board of elders indicating that we were engaging the yearly process of prayerfully working through our membership lists. The Book of Church Order requires the board of elders to “place on the inactive list the name of any confessing member whose relationship with the church has ceased for one year or who for one year has not made faithful use of the means of grace…” (BCO 1.1.5.2d). Rather than defining “relationship” by requiring a certain number of times in worship or a specific level of giving, we have defined it as graciously as we believe we possibly can:

• Regularly attending worship at Pultneyville Reformed Church, and
• Regularly giving of time and resources to further Christ’s ministry through Pultneyville Reformed Church.

Throughout this process, we have attempted to be as liberal as possible in our understanding of the term “regularly,” and although we have felt the need to move some of our confessing members to the “inactive” list, it is our hope and prayer that as many as possible will re-engage their relationship with Pultneyville Reformed Church and return to active participation in the life and ministry of the church.

While you have not been moved to the inactive list, we wanted to make sure the process is as transparent as possible and assure everyone that “inactive” does not mean someone has been stricken from the rolls or that they are no longer a part of the community. It simply means that their relationship with the congregation has not fit into the above definition for at least a year. We hope and pray that you will join us in helping to re-engage our inactive members.

The earliest Christians are described as devoting “themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts. 2:42). We hope you will continue that life of fellowship and faithfulness here at Pultneyville Reformed Church and help others to join us!

Grace and peace to you,

Your board of elders
Sample Letter to Inactive Members

Dear ________________,

About a month ago, you should have received a letter from the board of elders indicating that we were engaging the yearly process of prayerfully working through our membership lists. The Book of Church Order requires the board of elders to “place on the inactive list the name of any confessing member whose relationship with the church has ceased for one year or who for one year has not made faithful use of the means of grace…” (BCO 1.1.5.2d). Rather than defining “relationship” by requiring a certain number of times in worship or a specific level of giving, we have defined it as graciously as we believe we possibly can:

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You are receiving this letter because we have moved you to the inactive list.

Please understand, “inactive” does not mean that you have been stricken from the rolls or that you are no longer a part of the community. It simply means that your relationship with the congregation has not fit into the above definition for at least a year. We hope and pray that we can remove you from the inactive list as soon as possible and are sincerely interested in knowing what we may be able to do to facilitate your return.

Along with this letter you have received a note from the elder whose care list you are a part of. That person will also be contacting you within the next month. If you feel uncomfortable talking to her or him, please feel free to contact our pastor directly.

The earliest Christians are described as devoting “themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts. 2:42). We hope you will rejoin us in that life of fellowship and faithfulness here at Pultneyville Reformed Church!

Grace and peace to you,

Your board of elders