

## Section

# 1

# Look Before You Leap

## *Preparing for Membership*

### Overview

#### SECTION OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will have the opportunity to:

- Reflect on the importance of church membership.
- Understand the value of allowing time for reflection in your membership program.
- Tailor-make the membership program to best meet your students' needs.
- Examine the crucial role of adult sponsors.
- Recruit and equip adult sponsors.
- Invite parents into the membership program.
- Encourage teens to enter the membership program.

#### HOW DO I USE THIS SECTION?

The four chapters of this section are listed below. These chapters are designed to help you and your students *prepare* for church membership. Fight the temptation to jump right into teaching membership without reading this section. With good preparation, membership will be a significant event in your students' lives!

Chapter 1: *Why Church Membership for Teens?*

Chapter 2: *Which Way Is the Best Way to Use This Resource?*

Chapter 3: *Why Do I Need Sponsors, and Where Are They Hiding?*

Chapter 4: *Inviting Teens to Participate*

#### ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- **Remember, you are the final editor.** This resource will work best if you take time to read each section to determine which activities will work in your church and which will not. If you feel overwhelmed as you work through this resource the first time, then just pick and choose a few of the key activities. Next time you prepare students for membership, try adding a few more!

- **Get help.** Chapter 3 provides specific instructions for inviting and equipping adult sponsors to assist in the church membership preparation. Relationship building is a crucial element in a successful church membership program. Your students are joining a people, not an idea. Help them feel connected to others.

- **Be adventurous.** Don't be afraid to move out of your comfort zone. Activities that sound strange to you may really hook your students. Learn and play along with your group.

- **Use your resources.** If you haven't already, make certain you order a copy of the *Vital Connection* student book for each teen in your membership program. This resource walks students through a 28-day examination of who they are as disciples of Christ and what it means to become a member of a community of believers.

As facilitator, you'll also want your own copy; plus it would be ideal if each mentor and adult sponsor assisting you could have his or her own copy of this resource as well! You can order these books from Nazarene Publishing House at 1-800-877-0700.



# WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP FOR TEENS?

## Only Fools Rush In

**Y**ou can't believe your eyes! On the other side of a busy downtown street, Jesse and Danae (two of your very own students) are strolling hand-in-hand right into the arms of danger! Your heart races, and your head pounds, as you stare in horror at the sign above the door they're about to enter. Rubbing your eyes, you look again, but the pink and purple neon banner still blazes in the night: "Welcome to the 'Elvis Is Alive' Chapel of Love."

"They've only been dating one week!" your mind screams as you dart across the street. Grabbing them both by their collars, you jerk them back from the entryway. "Just what do you think you're doing?" you holler. "You're not ready for this! You don't even really know each other! Can't we talk about it first? What are you thinking?"

Jesse shrugs his shoulders. "Everyone says we're the 'perfect couple' . . . that we belong together. The way I see it, we were probably going to do it sooner or later, so I thought it might as well be sooner . . ." Jesse's apathetic voice trails off as you stand in stunned disbelief. Just then, Danae's uncontrollable giggling snaps you back into reality. "Isn't this great? I mean, why not? I'm so excited!" she chatters.

"Have either of you counted the cost?" you frustratedly ask. "Your decision today carries with it lifelong responsibilities. Are either of you ready for those? And what about the benefits that come along with the responsibilities? You're not ready to receive them either,

if you haven't taken time for preparation!"

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How many of us would allow our students to form such a sacred covenant without helping them count the cost? After all, "covenant making" takes time and preparation, doesn't it? Aren't *covenant makers* less likely to become *covenant breakers* if they simply take enough time to get ready? Covenant relationships transform our lives, and they demand preparation. This is God's design, whether we're talking about marriage or a relationship with Christ or even membership in the church.

How often do teens enter the covenant of church membership without first adequately counting the cost? How many join the church just because they're "expected" to? How many others join in a hurry and flurry of excitement without asking any other question than "why not?" And what role do we spiritual leaders play in this process? Are we assisting them in adequately counting the cost, or are we rushing them so quickly through the preparation process that there's no time to get ready? Can we honestly believe that our teens are ready for church membership just because they agree with some basic beliefs and a few rules? Just as premarital counseling is necessary in order to give a marriage every opportunity to flourish, time and preparation are also necessary for church membership. Church membership is one of God's gifts to us.

## The Gift of Membership

When church membership is alive and healthy, it gives teens an identity: the opportunity to publicly affirm who they are in Christ. It also gives teens a community: a people to belong to. And it gives them the means to a lifelong faith built upon a sacred, covenantal vow. When teens join the church, they enter into a covenant that says: "For the rest of my life, the people of God will be my people. Their God

will be my God. I am one of them. I belong here more than I belong anywhere else."

At its best, church membership is about setting the right course for a lifelong faith; but at its worst, it can default to a quick session of data bombardment on the topics of basic beliefs, Nazarene history, and special rules. "There's not enough time for anything else!" we frantically cry. "Memorize this! Explain that!

Promise to obey those! Do you understand? Good, then you're ready! Hurry up! Let's go!" For the sake of time, we often miss a powerful opportunity to cultivate the spiritual formation of our students. How different this attitude is from that of the Early Church!

"Membership" in the Early Church came through baptism but only after three years of instruction, fasting, and praying. Before candidates could proceed from instruction to baptism, their readiness was judged according to three standards: sorrow for sins, faith in the church as the teacher of truth, and transformation of life. Each "membership" candidate called a witness who could testify to the authenticity of his or her conversion. After this, candidates took part in all-night vigils of prayer and fasting, in exor-

cisms to free them from Satan's control, and in the sacrament of baptism on Easter morning. Then and only then were they fully considered to be part of the church. How easy it is to see that membership in the Early Church was more than memorization; early Christians allowed time for transformation.

Today's spirit of church membership preparation has strayed far indeed from its roots. We tend to emphasize knowledge of facts, doctrine, and history—and rightly so, for these are crucial issues. But too often we concentrate primarily on these issues at the expense of neglecting feeling, doing, and the building of relationships. Church membership must touch the whole person if it is ever to make a long-term difference in the lives of our students.

## The Gift of Identity

All day long, our students hear a variety of voices calling. "Listen to me! Don't do what the others say! Follow me!" These are the voices of teachers and coaches, friends and family, magazines and music, politicians and preachers. Each voice represents a worldview (a way of looking at life that organizes decisions, relationships, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values). And in the middle of the world's noise, the voice of Christ quietly whispers, "Give up your all, and come follow Me." The choice our students make depends upon their sense of identity.

The goal of church membership is to help students come to see themselves as Christians first and everything else second. Christians first and athletes second. Musicians second. Wage earners second. Boyfriends or girlfriends second. Our mission in membership is to help teens come to the place where they can each confess, "Jesus Christ is Lord. I am His, and He is mine. I follow Christ, and my faith

matters to me more than all of the other stuff in my life." In other words, church membership should form Christian identity.

However, when we reduce church membership to little more than data transmission, teens are left confused and bewildered in the wake of our program. "What did I just do?" they may say. "What does it mean? Where do I go from here? Oh well, I guess I did what I was supposed to do. I'll just sit back down in the pew and carry on with 'business as usual.'" If our students are saying things like this, then they haven't grasped the impact that membership has upon their Christian identity. On the other hand, when we take time to explain the meaning of the membership covenant, to honor their confession of faith, and to let them think through and "own" their faith for themselves, then we guide them into a transforming moment of personal and public identification with Christ.

## The Gift of Community

Membership means more than status. It means more than official certificates, handshakes, and pats on the back. It means covenantal connection!

As mentioned earlier, church membership is very much like marriage. Both are dynamic, growing relationships entered into by covenant. A time of counseling, preparation, and counting the cost should precede the creation of both covenants. Neither should come cheaply or easily. God ordains and blesses both. Both imply that the participants need each other in order to become what God's very best is for them. Both create a new identity. Both imply that by God's grace, the participants are going to "work things out" through thick and thin. Both mark an entrance into new life, a beginning more than an ending.

In these ways, membership weaves teens together into the fabric of our faith communities, making

them one with the Body of Christ. Teens need significant spiritual friendships with older Christians in the church—adults who can lead them into Christian maturity. Church membership should help teens make just these kinds of vital connections. Instead, we too often allow teens to build their faith primarily upon their youth group experiences instead of their experiences with the *whole* congregation. In such cases, their faith may very well disappear upon their graduation from the youth group. The difference hinges upon this issue: Is the church truly an extended spiritual family for our teens, or is it only an institution that's happy as long as the teens keep themselves busy with their program?

Teens need to authentically know and be known by Christian adults in significant ways. Teens need a safe place to ask questions about their growing faith, and they need adults who will share the truth about

their own Christian experience. Teens also need to tell the church body about their faith, and they need adults who will listen to and value what they have to say. In every way, teens need *to belong* to the faith

community; it's not enough simply to let them "hang around" for a while. Church membership is one of our best God-given opportunities to address all of these issues in an intentional way.

## The Gift of Lifelong Faith

All of us know that faith is more than mere "head knowledge." If it is vital, faith involves life change, and that takes time. While faith begins with a transforming moment, it takes a lifetime to work out all of the details. Granted, some struggles end at initial salvation, but the work of faith is really just beginning. Faith is more than a status of "you're in" or "you're out"—it's a lifelong journey of growth and transformation. All of us want students who are in the process of building a lifelong faith, and church membership can be just what they need to chart such a course. Church membership should give students time to think through what they believe, why they believe it, and in what ways they will serve God.

If we are careless, however, our "hurry-up membership methods" will preach the wrong message at this point. Unintentionally, our actions will proclaim that graduation from this program is more important

than counting the cost of change. Too often, our "crash course" approach to membership says loud and clear that what matters most is adding more names to the church roll. We send the message, "Think through your faith, and count the cost . . . but please do it later. Right now, we're too busy getting you signed up."

Nothing can take the place of *time* in spiritual growth and development—not talented youth pastors, not exciting small groups, not clever curriculum. If we want church membership to truly be a *vital connection* in the lives of our teens, we must give the Holy Spirit time to prepare them sufficiently. After all, whatever is built quickly may disappear just as quickly, but by God's grace, whatever is built with time and care can endure forever. If it's time for church membership, then give church membership time!