

## E-Series

### Membership vs. Discipleship



While on vacation I got to catch up on reading some. One thing I read came from my friend and mentor, Bishop Will Willimon. Below you will find some of his (and others') thoughts on discipleship in our "me-oriented culture." I found them thought-provoking and hope you will too. I share it with you with his permission.

Pastor Michael

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### Christians as Consumers or Disciples?

*Tony Robinson's book, What's Theology Got to Do with It? has some good insights on the theological basis of the church, insights that can help our efforts at congregational renewal in the Wesleyan spirit. This week I continue with some of Tony's insights that I have found helpful.*

Lutheran pastor Michael Foss argues that the central challenge facing many congregations today is to shift their dominant paradigm from being cultures of membership to cultures of discipleship. When Foss describes what he means by a culture of membership, he turns to the model of the now-ubiquitous health club. Writes Foss:

I don't want to push the analogy too far, but for the sake of illustration, let's think of the membership model of church as similar to the membership model of the modern health club. One becomes a member of a health club by paying dues (in a church, the monthly or weekly offering). Having paid their dues, the members expect the services of the club to be at their disposal. Exercise equipment, weight room, aerobics classes, an indoor track, swimming pool—all there for them, with a trained staff to see that they benefit by them. Members may bring a guest on occasion, but only those who pay their dues have a right to the use of the facilities and the attention of the staff. There is no need to belabor the point. Many who sit in the pews on Sundays have come to think of church membership in ways analogous to how the fitness crowd views membership in a health club.<sup>3</sup>

Foss argues that this understanding has misplaced the true purpose of the church and distorted its nature. The point is not membership. The church does not have clients, members, or consumers of goods and services. The point is discipleship. The church exists to form and sustain individuals and a people who are followers of Jesus Christ, who are his disciples. Rather than buying into a consumer model of the church, where the customer is king and the church simply meets customers' needs, the church does more; the church redefines our true needs. The church transforms people according to the life and pattern revealed by God in Jesus Christ. It unites them with others who are committed to this way of life.

Nevertheless, perhaps because we have grown so accustomed to thinking of ourselves as consumers of various goods and services, the membership ethos is hard to break. I have noticed, for example, that in many congregations, when a new group gathers for the first time, the default option for introductions tends to take the form of name and number of years of membership. Length of tenure provides some useful information, and there is much to be said for loyalty and commitment, but something else often seems to be going on during such a ritual. A pecking order is established based on length of membership and an insider-outsider dynamic is suggested. Indeed, as Foss notes, "The membership model identifies who is in and who is out. No wonder those outside the church consistently say that church people are more judgmental than others."<sup>4</sup>

One Sunday when I was free from my pastoral responsibilities, I went to visit this small church. I parked on a nearby side street and walked to the front door, which was closed. I pulled on the door and found it would not open. It was locked. The Sunday service was to begin. I knocked on the door. After a while, an older member of the congregation pushed the door open and invited me in, saying, "We usually don't open this door; everyone knows to come in through the back door." Well, this arrangement was very cozy and friendly if you were part of the "everyone" who made up the aging and shrinking cohort of the

congregation. If not, you hardly felt welcomed. The message was clear: members only. However, and here's the crucial point, the congregation's members were oblivious to the message of the locked front door as well as to the implications of their confidence that "everyone knows to come in through the back door."

Congregations and clergy seemingly have often misconstrued or misunderstood the closing scene in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus meets the disciples on a mountain and charges them with the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). Somehow it seems we have heard Jesus say, "Go therefore, and make members . . ."

While at times in the past, clergy or other church leaders may have had so much power and authority that they have been indifferent to the needs, desires, and opinions of church members, I am not advocating this stance as the antidote to religious consumerism. Yet perhaps we have swung in the other direction. Yes, congregational leaders must take seriously the experience of congregational members, but the church is not driven simply by people's needs and wants. It is driven by God's dream and purposes for creation.

### **Will Willimon**

3. Michael Foss, *Power Surge* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 15.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.