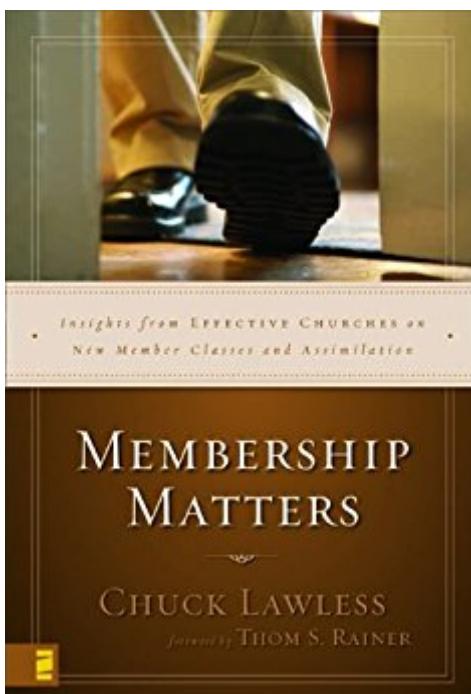


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# Membership Matters: Insights From Effective Churches On New Member Classes And Assimilation



## Synopsis

Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and AssimilationFindings from a national study to improve membershipclasses and to motivate current members into activeministryHow do churches move members both old and new into ministry? Many church staff and lay leaders knowthey need to start new member classes as a point of entryinto their churches but don't know how. This book isbased on a national study of effective churches andshows how growing churches implement new memberclasses and motivate their members into ministry.Membership Matters is designed to be a guide forchurch leaders wanting to start or improve a membershipclass. It includes models for classes and examplesof resources such as church covenants, class schedules, and lesson outlines. It also gives direction on motivatinguninvolved members to participate in ministry. Onechapter chronicles an ongoing discussion among pastorsof growing churches that are effectively motivatingmembers to do ministry.

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## Customer Reviews

Most churches face a significant attendance problem: their membership roles are significantly greater than their worship attendance. Some face a membership dilemma of a different sort: Their worship attendance far outweighs their membership roll. That was my church's problem. On one hand the membership process may be too easy, not facilitating proper Christian discipleship. On the other it may be too hard, inaccessible and contextualized too little. But, either way Chuck Lawless, in *Membership Matters*, has the answer, or at least a big part of it. Upon implementing some of Lawless' suggestions my own church grew in membership by at least 30% in one year! Chuck Lawless is professor and senior associate dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In, *Membership Matters*, his education and expertise are on the bottom shelf for all to reach. *Membership Matters* is a compilation and application of insight gathered from a national study of the membership processes of many effective churches. The study answers multiple questions: How do effective churches implement new membership classes? How do they move newcomers into membership? How do they motivate stagnant members to get moving? What should a member class teach? Lawless begins by chronicling some of the many reasons why we must give priority to membership classes. First, congregants are much more likely to stay committed if they are expected to commit up front. Second, relationships are the glue that hold many people to the church. Those relationships, especially between the lead pastor and his sheep, are first kindled in the membership class. Third, many of the effective churches use their membership classes as evangelistic opportunities. Souls are changed as lead pastors get to know visitors and explicitly teach the Gospel. Fourth, membership classes can be used to move stagnant attendees into ministry. Many just simply don't know what is expected, or how to take the next step. One of the greatest assets to *Membership Matters* is that reading it will force you to think through your own church's membership process. How do we get people from un-born to born-again to disciple to disciple-maker? How do we organizationally go about making disciples? Is it too complicated? Is it too ambiguous? Are we doing a good job at baptizing but neglecting the call to teach all that the Lord commanded? Or are we successful at teaching all that the Lord commanded but remaining out of reach for the unchurched and outsider? In reading this work and following Lawless through the process I was able to see the obstacle in my own church's membership process. For example, in the last chapter he plainly asks pastors to walk step by step through the membership process. To read along as each pastor describes his process is incredibly eye opening. You see a common theme of conversion, baptism and discipleship yet each is contextualized for their own church. Lawless also gives great insight

into the problem of stagnation, membership without ministry or influence without involvement. What good is having multiple members if no one is doing ministry? He sites several reasons why the people in your pew aren't serving: They are skeptical about the church in general. They have been wounded in previous churches and are fearful to commit. They are distrusting of organized religion and desirous of a non-committal type of organic spirituality. Transience also adds to the problem of non-ministering attendees. Lawless states that most Americans move every five years. But, as Lawless points out, sometimes the fault lies on the church. The non-ministering attendee may simply not know how to join. The process may not be organized or published properly. The pastor may not be properly communicating the need for commitment and involvement. However, the problem is not insurmountable. It can be overcome and here is where Lawless shines. He gives several practical steps to moving pew-warmers into ministry: First, allow them time to join. You don't want members who were guilt-tripped into joining. Second, strive for excellence in all that you do. In other words, people want to join a church that is successful. Third, continually put before the people the need and importance of joining. Fourth, clearly communicate expectations in the membership process. Fifth, recruit volunteers face to face during the membership process for it is through relationship that people are inspired to serve. In addition, provide entry-level opportunities to serve. Our lack of trust in them is matched only by their lack of trust in themselves. So, they need to have a few wins in the shallow end before wading into the deep. Though certainly there was a publisher's page limit, a few thoughts on certain current issues would have been helpful. For example, Dr. Lawless seems to say nothing about the tension between organic and organizational service. He calls us to develop systems, which promote member involvement. He even gives much needed practical help in developing the system. However, where does the Holy Spirit enter the equation? How can the Word of God be used like a sword to cut through the apathy, laziness and complacency of dead, church members. Are they dead? Are they alive? Is there a point at which organizational equations and formulas cease to solve the problems? No doubt, Lawless has answers for all of these and may have implied some of the answers in his many mentions of prayer, but even the discussion of prayer seemed like another box on the to do list. However, to be fair, this is a book of practice and practicality, and in that aspect it is very useful. Another example of lawless' silence would be in the area of Missiology. Many of us live among the unchurched, uncivilized and irreligious. We are not dealing with people who simply need to make a decision for Christ. If we were to force a decision, they would simply add Jesus to their sex, money and moralistic deities. They need to have their entire worldview shaped. In other words, how should we go about giving people time to process the truths of Christ? Should we immediately launch them into service?

Should we be concerned that they may not fully understand the gospel and use Christian service as a means of appeasing God? Perhaps, they should be assigned a mentor or persuaded to attend faithfully church for a season before becoming voting members. Dr. Lawless does admit that people need time to process, but much more could be said about how churches should handle this intermediate time period. Another minor but noticeable absence would be a discussion on the usage of church covenants in the membership process. Many churches do use them, and Lawless notes it. But, pastors have questions: should we use signed, formal covenants as Rick Warren suggests? Should we require understanding? And, what about constitutions and bylaws? What if people really are not able to discern the meaning of such documents? Should we teach literacy before the Gospel? Or after? As I said earlier in this review, *Membership Matters*, was a real inspiration to me and the church I serve. So, I highly recommend it. Let me explain what happened. When we first constituted as a church four years ago, we established a fairly rigid membership process. It involved a waiting period. After all, we didn't want altar call members. Moreover, applicants had to read and formally agree through signature the church affirmation of faith, covenant, constitution and by laws. Then upon turning in the signed agreement (completely of their own volition and initiative) we would schedule a elder examination after which we would vote as a congregation to approve them for membership. This process worked great as we assimilated church folk from other churches and from out of town. The internet was our greatest witness. Most churched people appreciated the intentionality. Some even appreciated the rigidness. But, as our churched decided to move into the city, reach out to the local college and serve the poor neighborhoods around the church, we noticed that many were coming, attending and organically joining the church. However, they wouldn't make it formal. *Membership Matters* helped us to see that they weren't making it formal in large part due to the fact that the process was too complicated. Many of them couldn't read the documents, at least not with any comprehension. So, with the help of Dr. Lawless, in *Membership Matters*, we went to work devising a more contextualized membership process: Exploration, Confirmation and Celebration! In other words, if you are church planter or pastor wondering why your attendance doesn't match your membership rolls, then digest this book. It was a great help.

has some useful information

Was an excellent source for writing my Thesis on Membership. Minister Bernice E. Carson

This is a great book explaining why church membership is important and why churches should

expect more of their members. The author makes a compelling argument for conducting membership classes (without calling them that) and communicating expectations to new members. He also gives good research into churches who have conducted these classes and have seen great results. The book has a practical aspect as well, showing people how to conduct these classes and giving good ideas on when they should be given. A very helpful book!

I've known Chuck since he was my grader in Thom Rainer's "Introduction to Church Growth" class at Southern Seminary in the Fall of 1995. During my own M.Div. and Ph.D. work, he became more than a grader. Chuck became my friend. I'm currently serving as chairman of my home church's Long-range Planning Committee. One area in which we've identified a great need for improvement is in our new member orientation and current member commitment and service. I consider it providential that in researching books to aid in our task, I came across Lawless' work on those very subjects. I read "Membership Matters" over two days, taking copious notes in the margins and underlining liberally. Few books address membership classes and church member assimilation. Thom Rainer's "High Expectations" called churches to ask more from members as a means of increasing church health and commitment. Lawless' book moves a step further by providing a practical guide for church pastors and leaders to design and implement membership classes, not only to better incorporate new members, but also to inspire older, non-serving members to get involved in ministry service. Buy this book. Digest it. Discuss it. But more importantly, put its suggestions into practice.

I'm coming from 26 years in aerospace and 46 years as a Christian. Recently asked to serve on a Membership and Assimilation Committee of a Southern CA church with a member constituency of 1,000 I am seeking to get a foothold of credibility among those who have walked this way previously in similar churches. This book fills the bill as an easy read and a highly credible resource. The author is a professor and senior associate dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Graham has a lot of credibility as a resource for me as well as Rick Warren of Purpose-Driven fame (the latter of whose approaches are given liberal print space). What is distilled here are the results of surveys that were responded to by 52 growing churches (Appendix 14 is the actual survey included) with congregations ranging in size from 2 churches with less than 100 members to 10 churches over 1,000 members. Plenty of ammunition for ideas on how to fire up a meaningful membership and assimilation committee, a new members class or a whole darned church as far as I'm

concerned! Leave an email addy if you'd like to correspond on church growth issues. I have nothing to sell.

Great topic and it gives practical ways on how to get people plugged in, from the time that they set foot on the parking lot to leading a ministry

very insightful

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