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LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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**Evangelical Lutheran
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Study guide

Member status

By Robert C. Blezard

What's a "member" of a church today, when we experience lots of mobility in our culture and "belonging" means something very different for us than our grandparents? One church is experimenting with "membership" in hopes that it will dissolve barriers that prevent people from participating more fully in the life of the church.

Exercise 1: "I belong"

- What does church membership mean to you? How important is it, and why?
- How is it understood in your congregation? How important is it, and why?
- What important concepts are associated with church membership?
- Are there people who "belong" to your church who aren't members? Explain.
- Is there a divide between members and non-member attendees in your congregation? Explain.

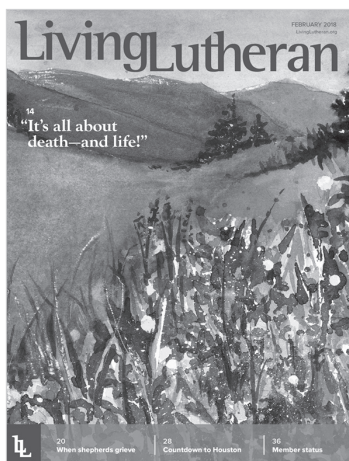
Exercise 2: Membership "by the book"

What constitutes official church membership is codified in a congregation's constitution. The latest ELCA model for congregational constitutions explains membership in Chapter 8. It lists several types of membership. Review your congregation's constitution and discuss:

- What does "member" mean for your congregation?
- How does one become a member?
- What different types of membership are there? What are the differences between them?
- What is the hierarchy of membership, with benefits and privileges accruing to each? What are the pluses and the drawbacks of this system?
- What might be a better way?

Exercise 3: Membership culture

At funerals where the loved ones post photos of the deceased from childhood to old age, you often see evidence of the groups to which the person



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belonged: church (of course), but also bowling leagues, bridge (or other card-game clubs), softball teams, Rotary Club or other civic organizations, professional associations, veterans groups and so on.

- To what groups or associations did your grandparents or parents belong? Why was it a part of their generation's culture to join clubs and groups?
- To what groups or associations do you belong? How about your children or grandchildren?
- Do people today join groups and clubs as they did in your grandparents' day? What do you observe? Why has the culture changed?
- How has this cultural change affected your congregation? The church in general?
- In addition to churches, how has this sociological change affected groups such as local bowling leagues, the Grange, 4-H Club, the Lions Club, Shriners and the Veterans of Foreign Wars?
- How can churches cope with these sociological changes? As a study group, brainstorm action steps and give the list to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.

Exercise 4: Is membership adiaphora?

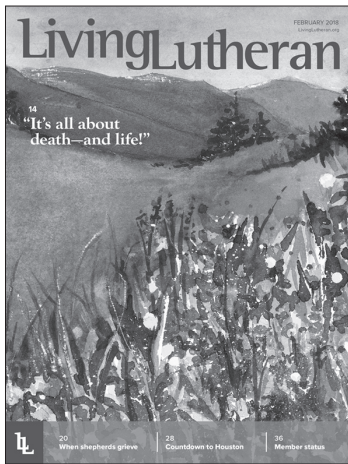
For Lutherans, "adiaphora" refers to matters that are not essential to the faith or the church. For instance, whether a congregation stands or remains seated during a prayer or hymn is adiaphora—unessential, a matter of little consequence.

- Should membership criteria be a matter of adiaphora? Why or why not?
- What is lost when the concept of membership is loosened? What is gained?
- On the balance, does what is gained outweigh what is lost?

Exercise 5: The "new" membership

People may be less inclined to "join" a congregation nowadays, but still eager to be a part of church life.

- Is your church seeing a different pattern of church attendance when it comes to people participating but not necessarily joining? Explain.
- Why are more people, especially younger people, less inclined to join your congregation?
- Why does traditional membership no longer work as well in your context?



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).



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- How has your congregation dealt with this issue?
- What strategies can your congregation adopt to encourage people to participate fully in the life of church without necessarily officially joining?
- What would your congregation gain and lose by redefining what constitutes a member?
- If your congregation rejected the traditional definition of what it means to be a member, what would be a good substitute definition?

Exercise 6: The Great Commission

Identifying the purpose for their lives and their congregation, many Christians look to Jesus' Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

- Today we most often associate "commission" with a military assignment. What does it mean? What does it mean in a church and faith sense?
- What does Jesus tell his followers to do?
- How do you "make disciples"?
- What's the difference between a "disciple" and a "church member"?
- Which should Christians be more concerned about: making disciples or making church members?
- What does that look like in practice? What would that mean for your congregation? For you?

Member status

By Anna Anderson

Editor's note: *This article describes the experiences and decisions of Advent Lutheran Church in Arlington, Va., regarding church membership.*

The community at Advent Lutheran Church in Arlington, Va., is composed of mainly young adults and empty-nest professionals who work for the government, the military, government contractors or various support organizations. They live in fairly dense neighborhoods around Advent and move out when their families need more space.

Few of them were born here, and their family ties and churches of origin are quite distant. They generally don't expect to stay in Arlington forever (although some end up being around much longer than they envision), so they're reluctant to cut their ties to "home." I liken Advent to campus ministry—we have many dedicated, gifted and energetic people who are with us for only a few years, and a smaller group of long-term faithful folks.

These committed people serve faithfully as worship assistants, on council and in service projects. Although they consider themselves temporary, they are committed in the moment, and they both need and deserve a voice in how resources are used. We do need to hear their discernment in how God is calling Advent. When we found that our constitutional requirements were stymieing these gifts and



Anna Anderson (right), pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Arlington, Va., serves communion during worship. Advent decided to move away from a formal definition of membership for its congregation.



People who are committed to Advent in service and worship are eligible to vote and serve on congregation council. While many of the people who worship at Advent are transient, Anderson said they are dedicated to its mission and deserve a voice in the congregation.

voices, we felt called to move to a new style of incorporation and governance.

That's the underlying rationale behind Advent's movement away from a definition of membership that's confined by rules and toward one with an approach that allows people to define their commitment and involvement organically.

As Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). People get to set their own boundaries and may choose to be voters and council members based on their commitment to Advent's mission and ministries.

The congregation council reserves the right to confer those privileges, but people aren't required to convert or renounce their allegiance to other faith communities—something the term "member" seems to imply for a lot of our people.

In our experience at Advent, for some people the very word "member" doesn't bring the joy of belonging but rather negative baggage, such as the worry that their families and original faith communities will view it as a rejection of them.

Others fear that formal membership means they're adopting restrictions on how their faith life will be defined or that they're signing on to everything Martin Luther wrote, every ELCA statement or every congregational policy.

It's wonderful if the constitutional requirements for membership work for your congregation. Belonging and commitment are important values. But if member definitions are barriers to service or participation, and they're not working for you and you're having trouble envisioning something else, the first thing I lift up is that they're adiaphora.

Just as our faith tells us that God chooses us for God's kingdom, Advent chooses to extend the franchise without forcing a binary choice on someone who wants to serve the mission of Christ in this place.

This great word refers to things in the church that are helpful but don't have the power to save or redeem. So if the current governance is edifying in your context, no one is suggesting that you change it. But if your membership definition has ceased to be helpful in building up the faith of your people, as happened at Advent, then it's not a sin to change it.

We changed our constitution to allow the congregation council to extend voting privileges and council eligibility to those who live lives dedicated to serving Christ at Advent, who are faithful in worship and service, and who are incredibly generous in their investment in the congregation's mission.


These people serve on council, as officers, and in all areas of congregational life. One who is on council brings

tremendous gifts for detail and a passion for ex-offender ministry. Another brings gifts for event organization and artistic decoration.

Although the vote for our new constitution was unanimous, getting there meant dealing with some pushback, which is still around. One source of anxiety is fear about a "takeover" by theoretical troublemakers, but since council holds the ultimate say on who can vote, that fear has been addressed.

The other pushback comes from the statistics and reporting ministries. They feel the need for hard definitions to fill in the blanks on forms. The parochial report has begun to address this by asking for "active participants."

Resistance, however, puts us in good company. Moses (Numbers 11:26-30) and Jesus (Mark 9:38-41) got pushback, too, when people who weren't formal members of their ministry group wanted to participate fully and actively. Both these leaders said, "Welcome," and we at Advent say, "Welcome"—no hoops, no boundaries.

Just as our faith tells us that God chooses us for God's kingdom, Advent chooses to extend the franchise without forcing a binary choice on someone who wants to serve the mission of Christ in this place. For them we just say, "Thanks be to God!" 

Download a study guide by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab at livinglutheran.org.



Anna Anderson is pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Arlington, Va.