

**THE NEW COMMUNITY: A HIGH THRESHOLD FOR MEMBERSHIP**  
**LUKE 24:13-35**  
**APRIL 10, 2005 – EASTER THREE**  
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Remember that immortal line of Groucho Marx, “I’m not sure I’d want to belong to a club that would have me for a member”?

We are in the second week of a sermon series called “The New Community.” We are considering characteristics of mission-based vs. consumer-based churches. Last week we said members of mission-based churches seek to live authentically. This week we are talking about the bar for membership, how high is it?

Milfred Minatrea in his book *Shaped By God’s Heart* says mission-based churches appear in all sizes and shapes. He does not favor any one style. The issue is not whether you prefer 18<sup>th</sup> century hymns or 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian hip-hop for worship.

What is important, he says – the defining issue – is commitment to mission, the reason the church came into being in the first place.

When St. Paul said to the Corinthians, “now you are Christ’s body and individually members of it,” he was recognizing a relationship as intimate and profound as that bestowed by our blood ties. Paul witnesses here the creation of a new kind of family – the family of faith.

The word “church” is worn out. What does it really mean? The Greek word “ecclesia” means literally “those called out.” The church is those called out from the world.

It does not mean bricks and mortar. It does not mean a book of theology. It does not mean the ordained person performing rituals. It means *those* called out to be Christ in the world.

We are asking ourselves today what does it mean to belong to such a group? What expectations, behaviors, and values are we talking about?

Our consumer culture has watered down the meaning of membership. We bring our idea of membership from the world into the church rather than the other way around.

People “hold membership” in stores like Blockbuster or Sam’s Club. I got my Wegman’s Shoppers Club card by putting my name and address on a form. The discounts keep me coming back. We carry this way of belonging into the church.

Those on the inside, members, says one observer, do as little as is required to have the “benefit” of membership while those on the outside, non-members, do as much as required to share the benefit without becoming a member. The result is minimal membership. Low-threshold membership.

Low-threshold churches define membership at the margins of the church. “I was baptized there.” “We were married there.” At Westminster members’ children get an advantage for admission to WECP. Should that benefit define my faith, what’s wrong with this picture?

What I suggest today is that we put energy into defining membership at the core of our church life rather than the margins. We need to raise the bar not lower it.

Not to keep people out, but to keep the church family, the body healthy.

I can give you an example of this. We have a group of a dozen people who meet every other week here at Westminster. It is called the “purpose-driven life exploration group.” We search together for the meaning of God’s purpose in our lives.

It is clear who is a member of this group and what is expected. A member is someone who comes to all the meetings, does journal reflections on deeply probing and personal questions, is willing to share his or her reflections with the group and is also willing to give and receive feedback from the group.

The level of trust, openness, and honesty in this group is remarkable. If the group did not have expectations for attendance, reflection and sharing on personal issues and faith, we could not begin to achieve the level of honesty and growth we have experienced nearly from the beginning.

When membership is not casual, when it is clearly defined, when it sets aside individual preferences for the common good, when it challenges members to get out of their comfort zone and grow, when it dedicates itself to something noble and transcendent the result is a group of people for whom the sky is the limit for achieving what they are called to do.

These were the ingredients that powered the early church from a handful of Jesus’ followers into a movement that grew exponentially in the first days after Easter.

But here’s the problem. Today, churches often accept low threshold membership that expects little and offers in return three or four life rituals. The result is almost no impact on those marginally connected and a discernable weakening of the church body of which they are a part.

A few years ago we invited members of Westminster on Rally Day to sign a “covenant of membership.” This covenant had clear expectations: hands on mission experience; regular worship and study in the faith; and giving time, talent, and treasure – all three.

Many people signed that covenant. I am wondering if we ought to consider a “covenant of membership” at Westminster again.

I know one church that expects every member to give a week to some mission project outside of their home community within the continental United States. That church also expects every member, think of it, every member to give one or more weeks of service to a global mission once every five years. I am talking about a very large church.

Skeptics ask how does that church enforce those expectations. The answer is they don’t have to because those expectations are part of the culture of the church. When your church culture is shaped by God’s heart people *want* to participate, sacrifice, and get involved – not cut corners.

What’s happening in the mission-based church movement is the churches are redefining normal Christianity. Normal faith for mission-based churches looks very much like the faith described in the book of Acts.

These churches practice and believe in the ministry of every member.

Churches that practice and believe in the ministry of every member overcome the professional-leader model for the church. Members, not just staff, are the ministers.

The church is where members discover their gifts and their calling.

One member of our purpose driven group said she was perceived by another Westminster member as having a “ministry” here.

Someone else in the group said, “I think I know what my gifts are, my question is where does God want me to use them. I used to think it was just doctors and social workers who had ministries but now I am searching for my ministry.”

Those are the signs, the buds of a mission-based church emerging!

Maybe you see where this is going. The only thing standing in the way of making those experiences common to all the members of this congregation rather than just a small group of a dozen people is where we have placed the bar, the expectation of membership.

I am saying we can redefine the culture of membership here. We can raise our expectations for members of the church and for the church of its members. Maybe you’re asking what happens to folks who are visiting the church or who may even be long time members of Westminster and aren’t ready to make that commitment.

What happens is they have an easier time deciding where they stand because it is clear what values, priorities and actions are expected of members of this body of Christ. While no one is excluded it is important to remember we are not and cannot be all things to all people.

Let me talk specifically for a moment about our mission. At the June Session meeting our elders will determine a funding and action plan to implement our big audacious goal for mission as well as for making desperately needed capital improvements to our campus.

The big mission goal we spent much of the winter discerning, and will introduce to the congregation in the months ahead, includes a major Habitat for Humanity project on Ferguson Ave. It also proposes a business mentoring program to create job opportunities for West Side residents who want to pursue their dreams.

If this vision for mission is to be big or audacious and improve the quality of life for others far less fortunate we will have to continue on our path to becoming a mission-based church. This convergence of the community’s needs and our spiritual depth is God’s way of getting us to grow.

There are families we know struggling to participate in the American dream of owning a home. We could help them achieve their dream. There are residents of the West Side longing to start a business or become better in the business they now operate. If business isn’t our strong suit I don’t know what is.

Community centers on the West Side and City Hall managers are excited about our vision. There are suburban churches who would give their eyeteeth to be this close to mission with relationships like ours on Ferguson Avenue and at City Hall.

The window of opportunity is wide open. It is time to do some soul searching, make some decisions, and rise to the occasion.

Shift with me for a moment to that lovely story of the two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Why don’t they get it? Why don’t they recognize him? This is a classic picture of the church before and after Easter.

Before Easter, like those disciples, we might know the story of Jesus but we don’t see or feel him in our lives as the Risen Christ. After Easter his presence is real.

As they walked on the road the disciples were in the pre-Easter church.

But after they stopped and invited him to stay with them for supper they entered the new community, the Easter church – a church we see in the book of Acts that is the archetypal mission-based church.

Where is Westminster in this story? We've been on the road, we've stopped for the night, we have this stranger in our midst. His presence is a blessing. But we still don't fully recognize him. It's time for dinner. We have to decide if we really want him to stay with us or not. Then invite him to stay.

There is some truth, probably for each of us, to Groucho's comment, – I'm not sure I'd want to belong to a club that would let me in as a member either.

But I can tell you this, I would give anything to belong to a church that promised to change my life and invited me to help change the world.

How about you? Amen.