

# Membership in the International Church

Reflections for the BICF Leaders

2009

As a new pastor in the BICF I am trying to understand Membership here. As in any church, there are obvious advantages to having a membership.

1. It allows a person to express their adherence to the local church.
2. It allows the leaders to know who are their most loyal followers.
3. It provides a pool of more committed people to enlist in ministry leadership.

Having served as a pastor in an international church for some time, I have found there are also some negatives to membership in an IC.

1. The congregation is so transient that great amounts of effort are necessary to teach, train, and keep up with members. After you get them in, they go!
2. Membership is not valued by young adults. One could argue that they should value it more, and it is our duty to make them value it! But it is quite a battle. Perhaps the most difficult element in this fight are examples in churches where membership is either meaningless at best or a 'moral veneer' for gross sin at worst.
3. Membership can convey a message to the non-members that they are not welcome to our closed club.

Keeping the pro and con of the issue in mind, how can we make Associate Membership useful for His Kingdom advance through BICF? If the membership policy yields good fruit in ministry, it is worth the effort.

I do not have any final answers, but I would like to offer some suggestions.

- 1) One year, renewable membership.

I read with the some concern the process of determining 'Inactive members'. Many of us have horror stories of this kind of thing! I do not know about other BICF venues, but at ZGC we have very little knowledge of who comes each Sunday. We could never confirm if someone never came for six months!

We can avoid all this by simply dropping everyone's membership at the end of the year (academic year?) and then asking everyone who is interested to join up as the new year begins.

The process would be simpler for a renewal, i.e. doctrinal statement already signed, etc.

This also challenges each of to recommit ourselves to BICF and its mission each year.

2) Major on the majors in the process of joining.

It seems to me we are looking for three things in the potential member.

a. Creed

We want them to affirm our doctrine. Hopefully they have already been hearing that doctrine in BICF. Many have taken classes in other churches. It might be good to display the creed and vision statement on PowerPoint and paper hand-outs on a given Sunday and take 15 minutes to quickly walk through them for all present in the service. It would put all of us on the same foundation of understanding, member and seeker.

b. Conduct

We also want to have some assurance that this person is a true follower. Of course, it is good for them to sign their adherence to our moral and character standards. But it would be even better to have someone whom we trust that knows them well sign for them. As I was writing this document I got an email from my team here that a man whom we wanted to be a Deacon is actually in sexual immorality now. I think we need to do more to know our people. In the States we are sometimes worried about having people sue us if we ask for too much information. Here I think we have freedom to probe deeper in a loving and respectful way.

c. Commitment

We want members to be more than pew sitters. What will they actually do for BICF? What are their gifts? What is their calling for ministry here in Beijing? I think we need to have those questions answered before they become members. Of course, we are always learning and growing. And a person may change ministries or grow deeper into a certain ministry, we hope so. My point is that if someone is not serving they are not really a living member....yet. We need to encourage them - help them find and use their gifts, and then recruit them as members. Filling the member rolls with people who are not really serving clogs the church arteries.

Cyber meetings and E-votes?

I have heard some disconcerting news about the poor attendance at BICF Membership meetings. Churches all around the world struggle with this problem. But being in 'good company' is no reason not to ask 'why'? Is this a statement of apathy, ignorance, spiritual immaturity, poor leadership, or all of the above? Is there anything we can do to make meetings better?

Can we incorporate the meeting right into the worship service? 15 minutes of songs, prayer, and Scripture and then a one hour meeting?

Can we have a meeting on the web?

Can we have votes for more straightforward issues done over email?

Can we tie the meeting to an eagerly anticipated church event – picnic, Christmas dinner, etc.?

The moderator could wear a Santa suit!