

CONNECTING YOUR CONGREGATION IN FELLOWSHIP
Purpose Driven Church Conference
Rick Warren

“Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, but you are members of God’s very own family... and you belong in God’s household with every other Christian.” Eph. 2:19 (LB)

“In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” Rom. 12:5

1. CREATE A _____ WHERE PEOPLE WANT TO JOIN.

The two things people crave most: Love & Acceptance (John 13:35; Rom. 15:7)

Fact: Growing churches love and loving churches grow!

Position your church as a family, not as an institution!

II. COMMUNICATE _____ OF MEMBERSHIP.

The Three Parts of the Christian Life:

1. Believing

“BELIEVE on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” Acts. 16:31 (LB)

2. Belonging

“You are a member of God’s very own family... and you BELONG in God’s household with every other Christian!” Eph. 2:19 (LB)

3. Becoming

“From the very beginning God decided that those who came to Him... should BECOME like His Son...” Rom. 8:29

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Benefits to Membership

1. It identifies me as a genuine believer. – Eph. 2:19; Rom. 12:5
2. It provides me a spiritual family to support and encourage me. Gal. 6:1-2; Heb. 10:24-25
3. It gives me a place to discover and use my gifts in ministry. – 1 Cor. 12:4-27
4. It places me under the spiritual protection of godly leaders. – Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28-29
5. It gives me the accountability I need to grow. – Eph. 5:21

Help people see “Membership” as a step of spiritual growth rather than as an organizational ritual.

III. DEVELOP _____ TO ASSIMILATE NEW MEMBERS.

“Make plans by seeking advice” Prov. 20:18

Questions You Need To Ask:

1. What does God expect from members of His church?
2. What do we expect from our members right now?
3. What kind of people already make up our congregation?
4. How will that change in the next 5 to 10 years?
5. What do our members value?
6. What are new members’ greatest needs?
7. What are our long-term members’ greatest needs?
8. How can we make membership more meaningful?
9. How can we insure that members feel loved and cared for?
10. What do we owe our members?
11. What resources or services could we offer our members?
12. How could we add value to what we already offer?

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Five Questions Prospective Members Ask

1. Do I fit here? (question of acceptance)
2. Does anybody want to know me? (friendship)
3. Am I needed? (value)
4. What is the advantage of joining? (benefit)
5. What is required of members? (expectations)

IV. ESTABLISH A REQUIRED _____

The manner in which people join your church will determine their effectiveness as members for years to come.

A strong membership class will grow a strong church.

**Outline of Class 101
*DISCOVERING SADDLEBACK MEMBERSHIPS***

OUR SALVATION

- Making Sure You Are A Christian
- The Symbols Of Salvation

OUR STATEMENTS

- Our Purpose Statement: Why we exist
- Our Vision Statement: What we intend to do
- Our Faith Statement: What we believe
- Our Values Statement What we practice

OUR STRATEGY

- A Brief History of Saddleback
- Who We Are Trying To Reach (Our Target)
- Our Life Development Process To Help You Grow
- The S.A.D.D.L.E.B.A.C.K. Strategy

OUR STRUCTURE

- How Our Church is Organized for Growth
- Our Affiliation
- What It Means To Be A Member
- What Is My Next Step After Joining?

The Saddleback quiz

Offer three versions of the Membership Class: Children's, Youth & Adult
Outlines and tapes of this class are available, www.pastors.com

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V. DEVELOP A MEMBERSHIP _____

- The difference between “attender” and “member” can be summed up in one word:

- People *will* leave your church no matter what. When your church adopts a membership covenant, you are choosing who stays!

***THE SADDLEBACK
MEMBERSHIP COVENANT***

Having received Christ as my Lord and Savior and been baptized, and being in agreement with Saddleback’s statements, strategy, and structure, I now feel led by the Holy Spirit to unite with the Saddleback church family. In doing so, I commit myself to God and to the other members to do the following:

1. I WILL PROTECT THE UNITY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By acting in love toward other members
- ... By refusing to gossip
- ... By following the leaders

2. I WILL SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By praying for its growth
- ... By inviting the unchurched to attend
- ... By warmly welcoming those who visit.

3. I WILL SERVE THE MINISTRY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By discovering my gifts and talents
- ... By being equipped to serve by my pastors
- ... By developing a servant’s heart

4. I WILL SUPPORT THE TESTIMONY OF MY CHURCH

- ... By attending faithfully
- ... By living a godly life
- ... By giving regularly

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VI. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD _____ .

- Retreats
- Fellowship
- Name Tags
- Relational activities as a part of every meeting

VII. ENCOURAGE EVERY MEMBER TO JOIN A _____ .

VIII. KEEP COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OPEN.

Prov. 27:23 *“Be sure you know the condition of your flock; give attention to your herds.”*

The channels we use for feedback:

1. The Welcome/Registration Card
2. CARE Callers Reports
3. Lay Pastor Reports
4. Prayer Chain

Channels we use to communicate a message to the congregation:

Fax machines	Voice mail
Video	Newsletters
Cassette tapes	Prayer chains
CARE callers	Newspaper articles
Postcards	Internet (Web site)

People tend to be *down* on what they aren't *up* on!

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IX. MAKE YOUR MEMBERS FEEL SPECIAL!

Suggestions:

1. Print a nice certificate of baptism and membership.
2. New member banquets/receptions.
3. Use public testimonies.
4. Take their prayer requests seriously.
5. Give them a meaningful ministry role.
6. Challenge them with an eternal vision.
7. Pastor's Coffee.
8. Staff Receptions.
9. Send cards on special days.

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We have looked at two of the purposes of the church. We first looked at Targeting Your Community for Evangelism, the outer circle. Then we looked at Gathering a Crowd for Worship, the next group in. Now we're moving further into the five circles into the congregational level. In this session we want to specifically look at Building Your Congregation, a caring congregation, a congregation where genuine fellowship and *koinonia* takes place. Specifically I want to talk to you about how do you turn attenders into members.

The concept of membership is taught all through the New Testament. But it's not the concept we normally think of when we think of the term "membership". Today when most people think of membership they think of silly hats, secret handshakes, dues and fees, meaningless rituals and things like that. But in the Bible the term "membership" talks about something far more significant. The Bible says we are actually members of the body of Christ and it compares us to the hands and the feet and the eyes and the ears and the nose. We are members of Christ's body. It's a very powerful but almost lost concept today in Christianity that as Christians we are not just believers, we are also belongers.

The Bible says that every Christian needs to belong to a church family, needs to be a part not just of the universal body of Christ but a local body of Christ. The Bible says in Ephesians 2:19 in the Living Bible paraphrase, "*You are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven. You are members of God's very own family and you belong in God's household with every other Christian.*" Romans 12:5 says "*In Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others.*" Circle "belongs". Each member belongs to all the others.

There's a myth today that baby boomers and baby busters are not joiners, that they don't like the concept of membership so maybe we should just throw it out because they're not going to join anything. They're resistant to joining. I have a great spiritual Greek word for that – Baloney! Thousands and thousands of both baby boomers and baby busters have joined the formal membership of Saddleback church with no problem at all. Why? You just have to explain to them the benefits of membership and the responsibilities of membership and the value of membership and why it's important. If you do a lousy job of explaining the importance of biblical New Testament concept of membership in the body of Christ, it's no wonder they're not going to join. But don't put the problem on them, put it on your communication style. People join what gives them significance. People join what gives them meaning. People join what gives them purpose. And people join what gives them connection and community.

We're going to look today at how do you build a church where people want to belong to it, they want to be loyal to it. We see membership not as organizational ritual but as a step in spiritual growth.

How do you do that? How do you build a church where people want to move from attender to member? Let me give you some suggestions.

1. CREATE A CLIMATE WHERE PEOPLE WANT TO JOIN.

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What kind of climate is that? There are two words: Love and acceptance. These are two things that everybody craves. These are both things that Jesus commanded the church to demonstrate. In John 13:35 He said, *“By this shall all men know you are My disciples...”* that you have a bumper sticker. No, *“... that you love one another.”* And in Romans 15:7 He says *“Accept one another just as Christ has accepted you.”* Love and acceptance by the church. They are to be hallmarks of the climate of our congregation.

Win Arn once did a study of 10,000 church members all over America. He asked them to rate the friendliness of their denomination on a scale. It was interesting. The two most friendly denominations in America, were considered by the members to be the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God. But the more important discovery in that study was that after rating denominations, he discovered that every denomination that was rated high on friendliness was growing. It had a growth rate. And every denomination that was low on friendliness was declining. Growing churches love and loving churches grow. If you want people to want to be a part of your church, you’ve got to create a climate of love and acceptance.

The single most important factor in what causes a person to stay in your church is relationships. The preaching may be good or bad, the music may be good or bad but what keeps people there over the long haul – the glue – is relationships.

There are a lot of myths out there today about fellowship. One of the myths is that small churches are friendly and large churches are cold and impersonal. The truth is, there are far more small churches that are closed cliques that you can’t get into than there are large churches that way. That’s why they stay small – at least one of the reasons. Everybody’s got this “closed clique” attitude that nobody new can get in there.

And another truth is, the only way you’re going to get bigger is by caring about individuals, not by caring about big crowds. You grow larger by caring about individuals. Impersonal churches do not grow. Nobody wants to go to an impersonal church. There has to be a way to figure out how to give attention to personal needs as your church continues to grow. If you can figure out that one issue you can have unlimited growth. Larger churches have somehow figured out a system, a process, a way, of giving individualized, personalized attention while they continue to grow.

A couple of months ago I was speaking in Seoul, Korea and while we were there we visited the largest church in the world which now has 750,000 members. They have an 11,000-seat auditorium and they have seven Sunday services. Next door they have an 11-store building that seats 2000 on each floor on overflow and they fill those eleven stories and that 11,000 seat auditorium seven times every Sunday. Then they have their satellite congregations who can’t fit in at the same place.

Yet in that church, if you get sick, you get visited every day that you’re sick. And they bring you an apple, which is a symbol of friendship in Korea.

How do you do that? By being organized. You need to create a climate of love and acceptance.

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This is something that you have to do intentionally. At Saddleback I send a letter of thanks to everybody who visits our church like most of you do. In that letter I include a little business reply card. We've done this for years. We call it our first Impression Card. It says, "Our church wants to serve you better. Would you please give us your opinion." It's already stamped and they can send it back. I only ask three things: "This is what I noticed first. This is what I liked best. This is what I liked least." I ask every person who visits our church those three questions.

We get maybe half of these back from people who take the time to send them back. I literally have tacks and stacks of these cards that I've saved over the years. It's one way for me to keep my finger on the pulse of the church to see how does the church look from a total first time view.

You ought to do this. You ought to start a First Time First Impression card where you say, "This is what I noticed first, This is what I liked bet, this is what I liked least." They don't have to sign it. All we ask them to do is indicate their age group because their age group will often give you a little insight why they said what they said.

I picked up a stack of these this morning that came in today's mail. Here's one:

This is what I noticed first... the people were warm and friendly ...friendly people... friendly warm atmosphere... I felt warm, comfortable and at ease... The thing is big! ... friendly and energetic people... warm loving atmosphere ... warm friendly greeters... wonderful loving friendly atmosphere... friendly spirit ... and joyful friendly atmosphere.... The people who greeted us as we walked on the premises were so gracious and reflected on us immediately... the friendly greeting by the men on the grounds... the people were warm and friendly... there were so many warm friendly smiles... I immediately felt welcomed... I felt comfortable and happy... on and on.

I could bring in 3000-4000 of those cards and 98% of them would say the same thing. We've gotten these four years. "The first thing I noticed at Saddleback was I felt warm, accepted. It felt friendly. People were smiling. There was a climate of acceptance."

This doesn't happen by accident. It is intentional and from the very first day of this church I trained myself, our staff and our people to be outward focused. When we first started our church we used to have a thing called "The Three Minute Rule" As soon as church was over, nobody could talk to other members for the first three minutes because who are the first people to leave? The visitors. So we said, as soon as church is over, you talk to somebody you've never seen before and after three minutes, they'll leave then you can hang around with all the old timers and talk ten, twenty minutes – as long as you want to. But you must be intentional about creating a friendly atmosphere.

The number one need in our society today is friendliness. As society is becoming more and more impersonal, as the church becomes more and more personal it becomes a magnet. People are looking for a sense of community.

If you want to reach large numbers of people, position your church as a family not as an institution. No one today is interested in joining institutions. But millions of people are looking for a family that cares about them. Today – because we all live with extended families all over

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the country –we’re a very mobile society. It used to be you lived in a little town with your parents, your grandparents, your aunts, your uncles, your cousins. You might have a safety net of 30, 40, 50 or more relatives within driving or walking distance of you. It’s certainly not true any more in today’s mobile society. You live on one side of the country and relatives live on the other side of the country and you don’t all the time have you family close to you. So we must be a family for those without a family.

How do you do that? How do you develop that family atmosphere? That caring congregation? It always starts with leadership.

First the pastor has to genuinely care about people. It’s no wonder why some churches don’t grow. They have a cold fish for a pastor. Let me give some of you a tip. Your church will grow immediately by 5% if you start smiling. One of the simple truths about church growth is you’ve got to be nice to people. You’ve got to be genuinely interested in them. I sometime get the feeling that some pastors love crowds and hate people. They don’t mind as long as there’s a big group looking at them, listening to them blab on but you get them one on one and they couldn’t care less about you.

Pastor, you want to know the warmth of your church? Put the thermometer in your mouth! You set the tone. You set the mood. You set the climate for your church. And it’s never going to be any warmer than you are. Many pastors by their very demeanor – the way they dress, the way they act, the way they smile, the way they talk – guarantee that visitors are not going to come back. They get the impression from some pastors that they don’t care. Now sometimes it’s shyness. You may be naturally shy. And God does call shy people into the ministry. But you have to really work at this issue especially hard. If you’re not naturally a sanguine – bubbly, smiley kind of person – you have to work at it and you have to pray about it. “God, let me show the love that I do feel inside but doesn’t always tend to come out.”

Since this is a conference for church leaders, I'm going to give you something that’s not in the notes. Let me give you some suggestions for church leaders on how to warm up the fellowship climate of your church.

1. Be approachable and real. Whatever you are as a church leader, your people are going to become. There is no right personality for being a pastor or church leader. God uses all kinds of personalities. But every church leader that I know that’s part of a growing church is doing everything they can to enhance their personality, to develop their personality, to grow, to not just be stuck but to continually be developing your own personal warmth, your integrity, your people skills and things like that.

I'm not going to talk to you about this. Go read a bunch of Zig Zigler books. John Maxwell’s got some good stuff on this. Read Dale Carnegie’s classic How To Win Friends. I know that sounds like a shallow title but it’s full of gems on how to deal with people one on one.

One of the ways as a church leader, as a pastor, you can show your approachability to people is hold a monthly pastor’s open house, a pastor’s coffee or chat. We did this for years as the church was growing until we went to four services and I just wore out on the weekends. I invited everybody who visited our church in the previous month to my home on a Sunday night. Then

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after it got bigger we started having to take reservations and we'd take the first 35 people. You'd go out on the patio, pick up an invitation and it had the map to my house on the back. I discovered an interesting phenomena. Many people would never want you to come visit their home. They're not at all excited about the pastor coming to their place. But they're curious as all get-out to see how you live! They're itching to see how and where you live. So I took advantage of that natural curiosity and once a month I would invite those who are visiting our church to our house.

I couldn't believe this: People would give me one of two reactions. Some would say, "I've been here two weeks and I'm already in the pastor's home! This is incredible!" And then I had some other people a few who were transfers from other churches, "I was in my previous church for ten years and was never in the pastor's home!" So we would invite them to our place. Kay would provide just real simple refreshments. It wasn't anything fancy. Coffee and maybe some cake. We never put out a bunch of hors d'oeuvres or anything like that. We lived in a very small house for the first ten or twelve years –1200 square feet. Yet we'd bring in 35 people and just put chairs all over the living room.

It was a real simple agenda. We'd go around the room and I'd say, "First tell me your name and I want you to answer two questions. Why did you come to Saddleback church and why did you come back."

Why did you come? "They'd say so and so brought me or I heard about this." I'm always thinking, making notes why people are coming.

Why did I come back? "I really liked the music. ... the messages really seemed to help me and I'm going through a tough time." By the time you get around the room you've had 35 strangers brag on your church and they've all convinced themselves to join! You don't have to say a single thing. (Like "Don't you like my preaching") They'd just go around the room and convince themselves. It was a very powerful tool.

The next thing I would do is explain the baseball diamond, Class 101, 201, 301, 401 and how the next step is to take the Membership Class and what it's all about. I'd give a brief history of the church and then I'd throw it open for questions and answers. We'd do that for a while then dismiss and eat and I'd say, "I'll talk to any of you as long as you want."

That simple little tool which showed my approachability and "This guy's just like us. He's got dirty laundry in the corner and the lawn needs to be mowed." People could see who you were.

I got this one the other day, "Pastor Rick is just a real person like I am. I felt that he would like me just as much as I liked him." That's the kind of attitude you want to develop. If you get that kind of reputation in a city, you don't ever have to do any more advertising. It just gets passed on and on. We've had people who show up at this church and they've said, "A friend of mine who goes to a barber said that the barber was told by one of his clients who had a friend that if you had a problem, Saddleback is the place to go." It's that kind of long thing. When you build that kind of reputation... that's the place where it's not stuffy, but they really care about you and they care about your problems – attendance will be the least of your problems. You'll have to lock the door to keep people out.

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Be approachable and be real.

2. Memorize names. It shows that you are interested in people. Nothing sounds sweeter to a second time visitor than you remembering their name. I memorized every name in this church up until the first 3000 then my brain fried and I can't even remember my kids' names now! It's very important to people.

We'd take pictures of people and I made little flash cards. The registration cards that every one fills out, I read every one every Sunday for years and years. I could actually recognize your handwriting. You get to know people by seeing names, week after week.

Work hard at that. It shows you care.

3. Personally greet people before and after the services. For the first three years of Saddleback church, I shook every person's hand every week. We were in Laguna Hills High School and there was a gate around the patio and everybody had to go out that one gate. There was only one way in and out of the high school. When we closed in prayer, I'd have somebody lead in prayer, and I'd run out to the gate. So everybody had to walk past me to get out of the high school campus. I'd shake hands with them every week. You do that and ask their name and pretty soon you get them down.

One of the best ways to warm up an audience, if you're going to be speaking to them is get to know as many people as you can before you speak to them. Get out and walk among the people, talk to them, get names, listen to them. You can warm them up in advance. If you're ever speaking to a hostile audience, the simplest way to win them over is to tell a joke on yourself. If you're speaking to prisoners or Hell's Angels club or some real resistant group, just tell a couple of jokes on yourself and they'll think, "That guy doesn't think he's hot! He's just one of us." It lowers the resistance level.

I know a lot of churches that right before they have the service the staff will get together and pray or the staff and elders or the staff and deacons get together and pray. I'll never put down praying because you ought to be praying for the service. We call that the Holy Huddle. But at Saddleback, we don't do that because here's our thinking. There are many people that are going to walk onto this campus that are only going to be here one hour a week and it our only opportunity to meet with them. If they're waiting for a service or it's after the service and we're back huddled in a room praying, I can't talk with them. It's my one chance to get with them. So I tell all my staff, "Do your praying at home. Do your praying during the week. Because when this campus is having people come onto it and leaving, I want you to spend maximum time on the patio meeting, greeting, talking serving, counseling, sharing, praying with them. Not with me." So we don't do our holy huddle before the service. We pray at other times of the week and then when people are here we spend that time with them.

Another thing is touch people. We have here a high touch ministry. We give lot of hugs, lots of handshakes, lots of pats on the back. There are a lot of lonely people in the world. Studies have shown that if you don't get touched you actually get skin deprivation. Study the ministry of Jesus and how many times He touched people. At the beginning and end of each service we say,

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“Turn around and shake hands with three people ... or give somebody a hug or a pat on the back.” I’ve had people tell me, “The only physical affection I get all week is at church.” When I’m out on the patio and the service is over and I’m shaking hands with people, talking, hugging, I often hug somebody and wonder how long that hug has got to last that person. I’ve thought about going into full time Christian hugging. I think it’s a legitimate ministry.

On the patio and around the church campus, everybody you meet as a church leader, you want to give them a look, a word, and a touch. Look into their eyes. Very few people have people look into their eyes today. Love them with your eyes. Give them a look. Give them a word of encouragement. Give them a touch, a pat on the back, a squeeze of the hand.

I regularly receive notes like these. “Pastor Rick, I can’t tell you what it meant to me when on Friday, you put your arm around me in comfort. I felt as though Jesus’ arms were holding me with such compassion and tenderness. I know now that I will make it through this not so exciting time and I know He sent me here so I could feel God’s caring and love.” I didn’t know that this woman the next day was having a mastectomy. I didn’t know that.

One said, “I’ve been asking the Lord for a positive sign and before the service Pastor Glenn who I’d never met walked by my seat and without saying a word, put his hand on my shoulder and then I knew that the Lord had not forgotten me.”

A note that came to Chaundel, Pastor Tom’s wife, “Last week after the Saturday service, you came up and gave me a hug as you were walking down the aisle. It came at a time when I desperately needed assurance that God was watching over me. I took your ‘hug out of the blue’ as a sign that He was and is there.”

Pastor’s wives, deacon’s wives, elder’s wives, do you realize what a ministry you can have just by touching people?

Another one: “I have to tell you how wonderful you made me feel last Sunday when you came up from behind and hugged me. Sometimes I really struggle with thinking that people don’t accept me, or like me or enjoy me. Anyway, you really made my day. It’s been a really hard week with all the kid problems. Thanks for making me feel special.”

Give a look, a word and a touch. That’s how you raise the climate of warmth and acceptance in your congregation.

4. Write informal letters to visitors and everybody else. We have a series of letters: a first time visitor letter, a second time visitor letter, a third time visitor letter, a thank you, a glad to see you back letter. In every letter I send out I sign it first name only. I don’t sign it “Pastor Warren, Reverend Warren, Dr. Right Reverend Warren.” I sign every letter “Rick”. Why? Because I want even first time visitors to feel like they can relate to me on a first name basis. That there’s not some big status gap. Write informal letters.

5. Don’t use fancy language like, “We want to cordially invite you back to our wonderful services on the next Lord’s day. It is with great gratitude that we give you this gracious

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invitation..." Write a note that sounds like you talk, "Hey! Thanks for coming. Hope you come back!" Something real simple that they understand.

6. Use humor with people. The problem with most church leaders today is we take ourselves too seriously and we don't take God seriously enough. If you hung around our staff for any time you'd see they are just a bunch of pranksters. I hire people who like to do pranks! We do a lot of joking and jostling and making fun of each other and having fun with each other both on stage and off stage. Some of you know that I just lost about 50 pounds. They used to tease me that the politically correct terminology was I wasn't overweight, I was nutritionally enhanced. Rick Muchow is not short. He's vertically challenged. We play with each other.

You've got to decide whether you're going to impress people or influence people. You can't do both. You can impress people from a distance but to influence them you've got to get up close. When you get up close they're going to see all your warts. I think that's one of the reasons why some guys don't want to get close. They're afraid that they're going to see how you really are. But you can impress from a distance. All kinds of people are impressed by me who don't know me. But to me, the most important thing is having those who know me best respect me most. That's one of my life goals.

7. Accept and affirm diversity among your members. This creates a climate where people want to join. Don't force everybody into a rigid mold. You allow for freedom. Thank God we're not all alike. How boring it would be if we were all plain vanilla. That would be boring. God wants variety and we should celebrate and accept us. Healthy churches focus on unity not uniformity. You can walk hand in hand without seeing eye to eye. You go together and you work on the things you do agree on. At Saddleback we accept diversity in three keys areas:

We accept diversity, differences, in commitment and maturity. I talked to you yesterday about how we identify five different levels of commitment, five different levels of maturity. But we love everybody at every level. We don't say, "We'll only love you when you get to the core." We love you still if you're in the crowd or community too. You accept different levels of commitment.

It's like parenting. You wouldn't say to your kids, "Once you reach a certain level of maturity, then I'm going to start loving you." No, you love them at every level of maturity. We don't expect everybody to attend every event and we don't use guilt to motivate people. I had a guy ask me the other day, "Pastor Rick, will smoking send you to hell?" I said, "No, it'll make you smell like you've been there... but it won't send you to hell."

In our membership class we explain that in our church there are some issues that we leave to personal preference and personal conviction as Romans 14 teaches. For instance, like drinking wine. None of our staff drink. We're all tea toltolerers. Of course, we do take Nyquil which is just Jack Daniels with food coloring. But we don't drink.

We except differences in church background. We're a Southern Baptist church connected to the SBC but those with a Baptist background in this church in the far minority. The number one background in this church is former Catholic. The number two background is former nothing! Then we've got everything – Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, on and on. By the way,

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people no longer chose a church by the denominational label. Only 7% of people chose a church because of the denominational label. They choose a church that meets their needs. The average Christian today in America will change denominations four times in their lifetime. Why? Because they go to a new area and ask, What's the church that will meet my needs here?

Then we also accept differences in non-essential doctrines. Issues where there are godly people on both sides. Issues that even great and good Christians would disagree on. For instance, views on the Second Coming. We don't argue about that around here. I am a pan-millennialist – I believe it will all pan out in the end. I'm on the welcoming committee, not on the time and place committee. Actually, I am a pre-millennial, pre-trib position. I hold that position until three and a half-year into the Tribulation, then I immediately change to a mid-trib position. If I'm still here at the end of seven years, I quickly become a post-trib person. That's the way I'm looking at it!

We have all kinds of different views on charismatic gifts. In our church we have non-charismatic, charismatic. We have closet charismatic. We have charas-maniacs. We have anti-charismatic. And somehow we all get along together. We just love each other and try to minimize disagreements on non-essential issues.

Romans 14:19 in the Phillips says, *“Let us concentrate on the things that make for harmony and the growth of our fellowship together.”* Jesus had a name for people who are so interested in doctrinal nit-picking than on meeting the needs of people. He called them Pharisees. They strain at a gnat and swallow a camel, He said.

Christians fight over the craziest things. If you're going to make an impact on people's lives you're going to have to major on the majors not the minors. That's the real key. One of the things we have here at Saddleback is Augustine's statement, “In essentials we have unity, in non-essentials we have liberty, and in all things we show charity.” That's kind of our viewpoint there.

If you'll do some of these things as a leader and treat people with love and acceptance you'll have no problem about people wanting to join your church.

2. COMMUNICATE THE VALUE OF MEMBERSHIP

We've found that when people understand the meaning and value of membership they're excited about it. Joining the church used to be an act of conformity. In other words, everybody did it. That's no longer a motivating factor. Most Americans believe that you can be a good Christian without joining a church so it's not a matter of conformity any more, it's a matter of commitment. That's the difference between being an attender and a member. An attender is a spectator. A member is a participator. An attender is a consumer a member is a contributor. An attender is just along for the ride on the cruise. A member is a crewmember. You actually get involved.

We teach this over and over at Saddleback. You become a Christian by committing your life to Christ. But you become a church member by committing yourself to a group of other Christians. It's not just a commitment to God, it's a commitment to other Christians saying, “That's going to

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be my church, my family, where I'll love and be loved, share and be shared with, serve and be served, give and be given to." Remember the phrase "*And all the members belonged to all the others.*" When you make a commitment to membership, you belong to all the other members of that church. We call this *koinonia* and our definition of *koinonia* is being committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ. That's genuine fellowship. Fellowship is not red Kool-Aid and a cookie. Fellowship is being committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ.

We teach there are three parts of the Christian life.

1. The first part of the Christian life is believing. "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved.*"

2. The second part is belonging. "*You are members of God's own family and you belong in God's household with every other Christian.*" A believer without a church family is an orphan. The word "church" is used two ways in the Bible. First it's used universally to refer to every Christian who's ever known Christ and part of the family of God throughout history, the universal church. Then it's also referred to as local congregations. The church at Corinth, the church at Philippi, the church in Lydia's house. It's only used twice, in my counting, in a universal sense. The vast majority of times you see the word "church" in the Bible, it's referring to a local body of believers.

I have people say, "I don't need a local church. I'm a member of the invisible church." A lady told me that one time and I said, Great, when you get sick and you're in the hospital, who visits you? The invisible pastor? Who brings you meals at home? The invisible meals ministry? Who baby-sits your kids and keeps you accountable? The invisible small group?"

Only in America do we have what I call floating believers. Anywhere else in the world to be a Christian means to be tied in to the local body of Christ. Here in America where we have Christian TV, Christian radio, Christian bookstores, Christian conferences, Christian concerts, many people think they can just float around and not be committed. There are at least thirty commands in the New Testament you cannot obey unless you are committed to a local body of believers. You cannot obey those.

Just look at the "one another's". Love one another, care for one another, exalt one another, share with one another. Who do you do with those if you're not committed to any church?

Part of helping communicate the value of membership is explained in the benefits page 45, there are five benefits there.

First it identifies me as a genuine believer.

Second it provides me with a spiritual family to support and encourage me.

Third, being a member gives me a place to discover and use my gifts in ministry.

Fourth, it places me under the spiritual protection of godly leaders.

Fifth, it gives the accountability I need to grow.

We need to help people see that membership is a step of spiritual growth rather than an organizational ritual.

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3. DEVELOP A PLAN TO ASSIMILATE MEMBERS

Most churches bring in new members accidentally. They don't have a plan. It's almost like in spite of themselves they get new members. Every growing church does it intentionally. You have a plan, you have a process, you've thought it through. Because your church has a unique history and culture and background and denomination and growth rate, you need to ask some important questions. And the answers to those questions determine the assimilation plan that's right for your church. It should be unique. Just like everybody has a unique thumbprint, every church will have a unique assimilation plan. The Bible says in Proverbs 20:18 "*Make plans by seeking advice.*" Here are twelve questions you need to ask in planning your new member assimilation

What does God expect from the members of His church?

What do we expect from our members right now?

What kind of people already make up our congregation?

How will that change in five to ten years?

What do our members value?

What are our new members' greatest needs?

What are our long-term members' greatest needs?

How can we make membership more meaningful?

How can we insure that members feel loved and cared for?

What do we owe our members?

What resources or services could we offer our members?

How could we add value to what we already offer?

Answer those questions and you'll be on the plan for a tailor made customized membership assimilation plan.

Next you need to realize that prospective members' own set of questions that they want to ask. Before people join your church, they want to know five things. If you can answer these five questions to the best of your ability and to their satisfaction, they're going to join. If you don't answer these five questions, they're not going to join. Here are the five questions prospective members always ask. They may not be saying them aloud but they're thinking them in their mind

1. Do I fit here? That's the question of acceptance. The best way to answer that is to start affinity groups so that people with similar interests can meet people with that same kind of interest. Everybody needs a niche.

2. Does anybody here want to know me? That's the question of friendship. People are not looking for a friendly church; they're looking for friends. So you must create opportunities for people to develop relationships within your church. There are unlimited ways to do this but it does take planning. It doesn't happen by accident.

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3. Am I needed? That's the question of value. They want to make a contribution with their lives. They want to feel like they're making a difference. You need to position your church as a creative place where they can develop and use the talents and gifts that God has given them. That it's not just a place for musicians and Sunday School teachers, that you have lots of places where they can use their talents – artists and accountant, deal makers, cooks, all different kinds of talents.

4. What is the advantage of joining? That's the question of benefit. You need to explain the biblical, the practical, the personal reasons for joining the church. All that material, by the way, is covered in Class 101. If you get a copy of Class 101, it's got all the material we teach here.

5. What is required of members? That is the question of expectation. People have a right to know what's expected of them before they join.

4. YOU NEED TO ESTABLISH A REQUIRED MEMBERSHIP CLASS

A number of studies have proven that if you make a big deal about membership, it tends to raise the level of commitment. The best time to ask for a heavy commitment is right up front when they're getting ready to join. The manner in which people join will determine their effectiveness as members for years to come. We believe that the membership class is the most important class in the church. It sets the tone for everything the church does. It builds the foundation. It's the best time to elicit a strong commitment.

A strong membership class will grow a strong church. Strong doesn't necessarily mean long. I know some churches have these twelve-week classes, fourteen-week classes, six-month classes. They're never going to get any members. Nobody is in town six weeks in a row. They're always in and out and moving around. They'll miss a week then they'll have to come back and catch up that week the next time. Then you've got this terrible, horrendous bookkeeping problem.

We do our membership class on one single day. It's four hours long but you take it all on one afternoon because that way you get it all done in one shot. Our goal is to impart a vision and get a commitment. Why is it only four hours long? It's not our goal to give them information on everything we know. It's not a doctrinal class. It's "This is what Saddleback church is. This is that it means for you to be a member, the benefits and responsibilities."

For a number of reasons, I believe that the membership class needs to be taught at least partially by the senior pastor. Even today I still teach a portion of the membership class. Part of it is on video, part of it is live then the rest is taught by other staff members. I taught the whole thing myself for years. Very important to do that for a number of reasons.

First, they need to see your vision, your personal vision as a pastor, the new members do.

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Second, they need to hear your heart and how much you care for them and what you're committing to do for them and what you're expecting them to do back. They need to hear that commitment and feel your love.

I got this letter a while back from a couple that had taken the membership class. "Pastor Rick, thank you for teaching the membership class yourself, Class 101. It was very moving to hear you express your love and commitment to your flock and to hear your vision for our future. We wish we could have taken the class sooner, now. The comments and suggestions we made when we first came to Saddleback now seem trivial now that we understand the philosophy, strategy and the vision of this church. It will be a privilege to follow your leadership and be under your care. We're rally excited now to find our place of service at Saddleback."

That is what a well thought out membership class will do for your church. It produces those kind of responses.

Many churches have a membership class but they put the wrong material in it. Don't confuse a new member class with a new believer class. They're both important but they're different. New believers class is how to grow, basic doctrine, the understanding of the faith. New members is philosophy, doctrine, strategy, structure, what's involved, how do I get involved, the purposes of the church. That's what our whole class is structured around. Your Membership class should answer the following questions.

What is a church? What is the purposes of the church? What are the benefits of being a member? What are the requirements of being a member? What are the responsibilities of being a member? What's the vision and strategy of the church? How is the church organized? How can I get involved in ministry? What do I do now that I'm a member?

You need to be sure and include a plan of salvation in your membership class because you're going to have people who want to join your church who don't even know the Lord yet. We've had people saved in every single membership class for years and years. Sometimes we'll have 30-40 people accept Christ in a membership class. I think that happened just this last month. People will want to be a part of this then you get them to class and you lead them to Christ. It's great evangelism tool, too.

We have the 101 class in three versions. We have an adult version, we have a youth version and we have a children's version. We're eventually going to put it all on videotape if you're interested.

Some of you think, "What about the people who joined our church before we started a required membership class?" What you do is put them in by grace. Everybody else joins by works but these people join by grace! You grandfather clause them. You go to your people and say, "Wouldn't it be great if from now on all the people who come into our church are in agreement with our strategy and structure and philosophy and our statements and our purpose driven organization? Wouldn't that be great?" *Oh, yes. That would be great.* "We're not going to require this of all the people who are already in but it's just for the new people who come in from this day forward." *Sure, as long as it's for somebody else. Great.*

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Here's what you do. You start teaching that class on a monthly basis and about a year, year and a half from now you'll have a nucleus of people who start saying, "Remember what the pastor said in 101?" And you're going to have the other people saying, "We didn't get 101!" So they're hungry then and you have a makeup class, not to make them a member but to let them know about everything you've been teaching to the new members. You can even do it shorter because you don't have to cover salvation and some stuff like that.

5. YOU NEED TO DEVELOP A MEMBERSHIP COVENANT.

In 2 Corinthians 6:5 Paul mentions two different types of commitments. He says "*First they gave themselves to the Lord and then by God's will they gave themselves to us.*" At Saddleback we call these the first base commitments. First, you commit yourself to Christ and then you commit yourself to other Christians for membership in this church family. The difference between being an attender and a member is the word "commitment". The difference between attender and member is the difference between living together and getting married. Living together, there's no commitment. Anybody can walk out at any moment.

Just as in a wedding, what's the most important part of the wedding? The wedding vows. The most important part of the membership class is the membership covenant where people sign for what they're committing to. At Saddleback you can see the membership covenant. We have it more in detail in the class itself with Bible verses. We explain the covenant. At Saddleback we have four requirements for membership.

First, you must have a personal profession of faith in Christ as Lord and Savior.

Second, you must be baptized by immersion as a public symbol of your faith.

Third, you must complete the Membership Class 101.

Fourth, a signed commitment to abide by our membership covenant.

I know what some of you are thinking. "Rick, if we start doing this membership covenant, people are going to leave our church." Let me let you in on a little secret. People are going to leave your church no matter what you do. When you establish and adopt a membership covenant you're deciding who stays. And you're deciding who leaves. Who do you want to leave, the totally committed people or the carnal complainers? That's kind of a no-brainer, isn't it?

When you adopt a membership covenant, you are choosing who stays and who leaves. We allow variety in many areas but one area we do insist uniformity on is agreement with our philosophy and strategy. We even allow doctrinal differences as long as you agree with the philosophy and strategy. Why? Because churches rarely split over doctrine, they split over philosophy. They split over personality and things like that. You don't have to agree with every philosophical dot and tittle, but you do have to agree with what this church represents, where it's going and our purposes.

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6. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

The most important factor in people's decision to stay is relationships. You don't have to know everybody in a church to feel like it's your church, but you do have to know somebody. The average church member knows 67 people, whether there's 67, 600 or 6000 in the congregation. You don't have to know everybody but you do have to know somebody. And if a person has seven or more solid relationships by the end of the first year, they're going to stick. Create relational opportunities. Have relational activities in every congregation, even if it's just turn around and greet somebody. Provide nametags. Have fellowships. The fastest way to build the fellowship of your church is take them away on a retreat.

If you're just starting a brand new church and you want to jell the people real quick, take them away on a 24, 48-hour retreat. You take people away for 48-hours to the mountains, one retreat is equal to the time they'll spend with you in an entire year of one hour a week. So you get more time with them in one week than you would in an entire year by taking them on a retreat.

7. ENCOURAGE EVERY MEMBER TO JOIN A SMALL GROUP.

We're going to cover this more in the next session. The way you care for the individual needs of members in a rapidly growing church is the network of small groups. They are the most effective way to close the backdoor of your church. We never worry about losing members who are a part of a small group. Never. We have to grow large and smaller at the same time.

8. KEEP COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OPEN

Proverbs 27:23 *"Be sure you know the condition of your flock. Give attention to your herds."* People tend to be down on what they're not up on. Keep the communication channel open. At Saddleback we use every channel possible to keep the communication to our members. There are channels we use to get the messages from our members. That's feedback. And there are channels we use to send messages to our members. People need lots of communication.

One of the greatest tools now is email. We use that a lot with our people.

9. MAKE YOUR MEMBERS FEEL SPECIAL.

Here are some suggestions.

Print a nice certificate of baptism and membership. We actually put it in a leatherette binder. Everybody who get baptized gets a picture of their baptism and a baptism certificate put together in a nice leatherette binding. It's very nice. It looks nicer than a lot of college degrees you'd get.

Hold new member banquet and receptions. We use to do these after every new membership class. We don't do them that often any more.

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Use public testimonies from new members.

Take their prayer requests seriously.

Give everybody a meaningful ministry role.

Challenge them with an eternal vision. Don't apologize for the commitment you ask them to make.

Hold pastor's coffees.

Send birthday and anniversary cards from staff, an anniversary letter on the day they joined the church.

As the world becomes more and more impersonal, the more personal you can make your ministry the more people will flock with it.

Let me end with this letter I received a while back: "Dear Pastor Rick, I have carried the pain of physical abuse in silence for many years. A year after a devastating loss I moved here to southern California. Disconnected from everything, I was very lonely. I cried solid for three weeks. I finally decided that maybe I should try church. From the moment I stepped inside my first service at Saddleback, I felt I belong here. To shorten my story, Christ became real to me and I joined our church. I'm now serving in a ministry that is very fulfilling to me. I love being a part here. I know everybody's pain is different but we all need God. My pain was almost unbearable without a church family. When I took the membership class, I had to hold back tears of joy when you discussed how Saddleback was a family. It really is. And I am so grateful for my brothers and sisters here and for a church that I can call home."

Don't ever apologize for challenging people to commit themselves to the greatest organization in the world, the body of Christ, the family of God.