

When Churches Become Like Country Clubs

Nine out of 10 churches in America are declining or growing at a pace slower than the rate of their communities. Churches limp along as members drift out the proverbial back door. So what can church leaders do to stop the exodus? Thom S. Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources and best-selling author, sees this as a symptom of an underlying problem in most churches.

Rainer suggests American congregations are weak and in decline because church members have lost the biblical understanding of what it means to be part of the body of Christ. People join churches expecting to be served, fed and cared for, he says.

“Many times, probably more than we would like to believe, a church member leaves a local body because he or she has a sense of entitlement rather than a servant mentality,” Rainer says.

Rainer’s latest book, *I Am a Church Member*, released by B&H Publishing Group, is intended to remedy the outbreak of inactive or barely committed church members, addressing without apology what is expected of those who join a body of believers.

The book is an expansion of a 500-word declaration about church membership he posted to his daily blog in 2012. The post drew an exceptional response and started a conversation about the attitudes and responsibilities of church members. It also exposed a gap in current church membership studies and resources.

Rainer says he wrote the initial blog post after noting in some of his research an increase in church conflict. Over half of the conflict issues dealt with church members arguing over

their personal preferences, he says.

“God did not give us local churches to become country clubs where membership means we have privileges and perks,” Rainer writes. “He placed us in churches to serve, to care for others, to pray for leaders, to learn, to teach, to give and, in some cases, to die for the sake of the gospel. The time to get this right is now.”

In his book, Rainer writes about plateaued and declining churches in North America as seen to be declining evangelical influence in the culture. He suggests that as church members, we are tempted to blame secular culture, national politics or church leaders. Instead, he says, church members should “look in the mirror.”

“If outside forces and culture were the reasons behind declining and non-influential churches, we would likely have no churches today,” Rainer says. “The greatest periods of growth, particularly the first-century growth, took place in adversarial cultures. We are not hindered by external forces; we are hindered by our own lack of commitment and selflessness.”

Rainer reminds believers that church membership carries both privilege and responsibility. When a person’s attitude is consistently biblical and healthy, matters of giving, serving and so forth will fall into place more naturally.

I Am a Church Member offers basic commitments for the body of believers in a local setting—being a functioning and unifying church member, letting go of personal preferences and desires, praying for church leaders, leading family to be healthy church members and treasuring church membership. Each of the six chapters concludes with a pledge and questions for further study. The book can be used as a gift for new members or as a resource for church membership classes. Books can be purchased in bulk with 20 books to a carton.

"This book is a must-read if you want your members to understand what it means to be committed to a local church," says Michael Catt, senior pastor of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Ga. "I encourage church leaders to read it and then buy copies for potential and new members. It will impact church health and help close the back door."

Rainer says he prays his book contributes to the conversation about biblical attitudes toward church membership. "I am even bold enough to pray that God will use it to change hearts from self-serving to serving," he says. "As the church gets healthier, it will have a greater impact on its community and the world."