

CHATHAM CHRISTIAN CHURCH

South Main Road, RR #1, Box 340
Chatham, Illinois 62629

RICK WENNEBORG, Minister

Church Office 483-3987
Minister's Residence 483-3693

February 19, 1981

Dear Brothers & Sisters,

It has been quite some time since we last wrote to you sharing some thoughts on active membership in the church. Since that time we have tried to personally contact everyone who has ceased being active in the life of our church. We have also continued to study and pray for guidance on this matter of membership.

The more we have studied, the more we have come to realize that the problems involved with active, inactive, resident, non-resident, and whatever other categories of membership are divided, are the result of trying to maintain unbiblical concepts. In fact, nowhere in Scripture can we even find mention of church membership. We do read of our being members of Christ and of one another, but never of being members of a particular church.

When someone accepts Christ as Lord of his life and is immersed into Him, he is made a part of the Body of Christ. He is also brought into a new relationship with others who have made a similar commitment. Those brothers and sisters are then told to meet together for mutual edification and encouragement. That is how local congregations are formed. We have come to believe that no further requirements should be made for "church membership".

Membership, therefore, isn't something you transfer apart from yourself. If you are involved as a family member, you should be considered a family member. If you cease to be involved, you cut yourself off from your family. The family should make every effort to assure those who, for one reason or another, choose not to participate, that they are loved and missed. Efforts should also be made to resolve family difficulties if they are the cause of division. But little good is accomplished by creating varieties of membership to accommodate varying degrees of involvement, or by calling someone a family member, when they cease to function as such, just because their name is on a membership list.

Therefore, we are proposing that we cease maintaining an official church membership list altogether. In fact, we have already stopped publishing such a list, publishing instead a directory of all those who are fellowshiping with us. We feel this is of more value to everyone and helps to avoid walls of division among those who are worshiping with us.

We are also considering printing the enclosed statement on the back of our Sunday bulletins for the benefit of visitors and newcomers. We feel that it might serve to encourage them to more readily get involved in congregational activities. It may also help open doors for further study concerning their relationship to Christ. We would like your reaction to such a statement before we pursue it any further.

If you have any questions about this statement, or suggestions to make, please contact any one of the elders as soon as possible. If you desire to discuss this matter with all the elders, feel free to come to our next scheduled meeting, March 2nd at 7:00. It's our prayer that we be what Christ intended the church to be, no more and no less.

Pray for us as we seek the mind of Christ in these important matters.

The Elders

HOW DO I BECOME A MEMBER OF CHATHAM CHRISTIAN CHURCH?

Chatham Christian Church is simply a congregation of Christians who work, pray, study, worship and fellowship together under the oversight of local elders. It is not an organization to join, but a part of the Body of Christ. When a person accepts Christ as Lord and is immersed into Him, he becomes a part of that Body, hence, there is no need to join anything.

Since we have come to the conclusion that it is unbiblical and often counterproductive to maintain an official church membership list, there is no need to transfer membership into or out of our congregation. The active participation of an immersed believer in the congregational life of Chatham Christian Church is adequate to constitute membership.

We do, however, recognize the value of making a public commitment and, therefore, would encourage you to come forward some Sunday to publicly acknowledge your commitment to being a part of our church family. We would also give you an opportunity to reaffirm your commitment to Christ at that time and to be immersed into Him if you have not already done so. We further recognize that you may have a current commitment to another congregation and would, therefore, be happy to inform them of your present involvement with us.

If Christ is not currently Lord of your life, we strongly suggest that you re-examine your relationship with Him. A right relationship with Him begins with faith (Hebrews 11:6), and leads to repentance (Acts 3:19) and willingness to openly confess Him (Matthew 10:32) and to be immersed into Him (Romans 6:3-6), enabling us to rise to walk in newness of life.

If we can help you in any way, please let us know. We welcome you into our fellowship and sincerely want to be your Christian family.

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RICK WENNEBORG, Minister

Church Office 483-3987
Minister's Residence 483-3693

December 2, 1981

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We want to thank you for your many comments, questions, and suggestions concerning our proposals on changing the procedures for selecting and evaluating elders and deacons. Some of the suggestions we received were most helpful and some of the questions raised indicated a basic misunderstanding as to the intent of these proposals. We'd like to clear up these misunderstandings if we can and share with you a suggestion we received that we feel would help us accomplish our objectives, a suggestion that we continue having an annual affirmation of elders, but ask that a reason be given if someone cannot affirm an individual.

First let us assure you that as elders we have no desire to lead by compulsion or lording it over anyone. (I Peter 5:1-4) It's our desire to lead by example. We are very aware of the need to be examples in our personal lives and feel we should also set an example for the church by the way we function collectively as elders.

We feel that our primary responsibility as elders is to seek the mind of Christ for congregational matters. We do not view ourselves as a political body and therefore do not function as such. We do not vote in our meetings because we do not feel God's will can be ascertained on the basis of a vote. If every elder is Biblically qualified and is sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, we should all agree on a course of action. If someone disagrees, we feel we do not have the mind of Christ on the matter and postpone any action until prayer and discussion has brought us to unanimity. If it is not reached, no action is taken.

We realize that this procedure would not work in society at large nor in a governmental structure because the individuals involved in the process would not all share the same base from which to operate. We have discovered, however, that when we are all committed to the Lordship of Christ and the authority of His Word that the Spirit can direct us in the church in ways He could not operate in the world. It's our fear, however, that too many churches pattern themselves after the world's systems without giving the Spirit the opportunity to do His unique work in the church.

For years American Christian Churches have organized themselves in a fashion similar to the American government. The elders are viewed as senators, deacons as representatives, and the preacher, though few would want to admit it, as president. The advantages of such a system have been similar to those in government, namely a system of accountability to the people and checks and balances. It has, however, also created many problems.

By operating out of political base, the church has been open to political abuses and division into opposing parties. Oftentimes an elder or deacon would view themselves as the representative of one party or opinion in the church and take on the role of antagonist, especially if he felt his party was in the minority. Obviously that leads to a situation where you have winners and losers in a decision and very often those defeated develop a spirit of bitterness and a "wait until next time" attitude. Many churches have been destroyed by such political fighting. It's our contention that the church of the New Testament did not operate as a political organization. As the body of Christ it's only concern was understanding and doing what the Head, Christ himself, wanted done.

As a congregation we have already done much to restore that true nature of the church. We have long realized that deacons are individuals who are to be set apart for specific ministries in the church and not a second legislative body. Last year we simply affirmed that those selected by the elders were Biblically qualified, instead of actually electing elders and deacons. And as elders we have ceased making a distinction between the minister and elders in our meetings. It was with these understandings that we wrote to you concerning the proposed changes in selecting and evaluating elders and deacons.

There seems to be little concern about allowing the elders the freedom to select and evaluate deacons/deaconesses without congregational affirmation. This would allow us to evaluate each ministry individually on a rotating schedule throughout the year. Many have praised this as a more adequate method of overseeing the various ministries of the church, and this was our reason for proposing such a change. There has been concern expressed, however, about the seeming lack of opportunity for the congregation to be involved in the evaluation and affirmation of elders. This concern is truly appreciated.

It was not our intention to take away congregational involvement in such evaluations. We want very much to know if, in your opinion, any one of us has ceased to be Biblically qualified to continue serving as an elder or if your confidence in our leadership has been lost. We didn't feel, however, that a mere "yes" or "no" on an annual affirmation gave us an adequate evaluation. There was no way for us to tell if a "no" was the result of true Biblical evaluation or a mere expression of a personality conflict or misunderstanding. It was our hope that if there were honest concerns about the direction we were taking or about the personal

qualifications of any elder, that those concerns would be voiced so we could deal specifically with them. It was not our intention to silence anyone, only to get a clearer message.

Several, however, have expressed the belief that most people would feel uncomfortable with such a procedure and would therefore say nothing. An alternative type of evaluation has, therefore, been suggested that we feel would give us the information we desire, and one that most would utilize. It's been suggested that we still put the names of the elders before the congregation annually for affirmation, but that we ask for a reason to be given if someone cannot affirm an individual. This we think is a good idea. It would give us specific concerns to address in keeping with I Timothy 5:19 and 20, and would also enable most of our body to be involved in the evaluation process.

It is hoped that this letter enables you to better understand our intentions and answers some of your questions. If you still have concerns or questions, please don't hesitate to express them to us. We value your opinions on these important matters.

In the Love of Christ,
The Elders

Why our church has

No Membership Roll

By RICK WENNEBORG

as told to JEFF BRYANT

THE Chatham Christian Church, a ten-year-old congregation, in Chatham, Ill., changed its roll-keeping strategy last year.

The central Illinois congregation ceased maintaining an official church membership list in July, 1981.

Why the change—Rick Wenneborg, minister at Chatham, offered several explanations regarding the change in roll-keeping.

"The primary reason was that people could consider themselves members of Chatham Christian Church even after ceasing to function as members of the body of Christ.

"Inactive church members," Wenneborg continued, "could hide behind a facade of church membership when confronted about their relationship to Christ and His church."

How it was made—Elders at Chatham initiated the change in this manner. They prayed, studied the Bible, and discussed the matter at their regular meetings over a period of several years. The elders concluded that nowhere in Scripture could they find mention of church membership.

"We do read," a February, 1981, informational letter signed by the elders read, "of our being members of Christ and of one another, but never being members of a particular church."

Next, the congregation stopped publishing an official church membership list. This was done in an effort "to avoid walls of division among those who are worshipping with us."

Instead, Chatham publishes a directory of "all those who are fellowshiping with us."

Serious questions asked—Congregational members at Chatham raised serious questions in response to the roll-keeping proposal.

Particular congregational concerns are listed below. The question and answer format is quoted from a March 26, 1981, congregational letter signed by the elders:

Question: Is this open membership?

Answer: No. Open membership is the official recognition of someone as a member of a congregation whether they have been immersed or not. Only immersed believers who actively participate in our congregational life can be considered members of Chatham Christian Church. All we are changing is the need to formally transfer paper memberships.

Question: Will I still be considered a member?

Answer: Any immersed believer who is actively participating in Chatham Christian Church is considered a member.

Question: Will any records be kept?

Answer: Yes. We will continue to keep a record of all who are immersed at Chatham Christian Church.

Question: How will we decide who can teach?

Answer: As in the past, all teachers will be approved by the elders since the elders are held accountable for what is taught in the church. Many factors go into a decision as to who should teach, the primary factor being the teacher's own obedience to Christ. Obviously, therefore, anyone who has not obeyed the Lord in immersion cannot teach in Chatham Christian Church.

Evaluating the change—Chatham records show forty-two additions in 1981, the year the proposal took effect. The previous year, 1980, saw thirty-two additions.

Offerings increased 20 percent and average attendance rose from 189 to 217 over the same period.

Wenneborg feels the new roll-keeping strategy—eliminating paper transfers and

recording only those immersed at Chatham—provides a more fertile field for evangelism.

"People of various backgrounds find us less denominational and are more open to studying Scripture with us when it isn't tied to joining our church," the Chatham minister said.

"Since we don't officially make anyone a member of our congregation we don't have to officially withdraw anyone's membership. Only those who function as members of our body," Wenneborg added, "can consider themselves to be members."

But Wenneborg admitted that the new strategy is not without flaws.

"It may be easier to allow people to drop out of the church without adequate attempts to shepherd them," the minister said.

Excerpts from the Chatham elders' March, 1981, letter explain: "A right relationship with Christ begins with faith (Hebrews 11:6), and leads to repentance (Acts 3:19) and willingness to openly confess Him (Matthew 10:32), and to be immersed into Him (Romans 6:3-6), enabling us to rise to walk in newness of life.

"Chatham Christian Church is not an organization to join," the letter states, "but a part of the body of Christ. When a person accepts Christ as Lord and is immersed into Him, he becomes a part of that body, hence, there is no need to join anything."

In regard to membership transfers, Chatham maintains that

Since we have come to the conclusion that it is unbiblical and often counterproductive to maintain an official church membership list, there is no need to transfer membership into or out of our congregation. The active participation of an immersed believer in the congregational life of Chatham Christian Church is adequate to constitute membership. ▲

Rick Wenneborg ministers with Chatham Christian Church, Chatham, Ill.

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