

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

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"Membership"

Dear ones,

I want to challenge all the readers of this letter who are members of church congregations to do a bold thing and reach out to increase your church membership. There are people who would like to be members of your church!

They need the fellowship, they need the association, and they need the love. They need to be *insiders*. They live in a world that is cold and detached, and they need to truly *belong* to a body of believers. You have what they long to have, and you can see that they get it.

They want to be *accepted unconditionally*.

They need to be a *part* of something *whole*.

Where are you going to find these people? How do I know they are interested?

They are not far away.

You already know them.

In fact, they are already on your payroll.

I'm talking about your preacher and his family!

I work with preachers all the time. I've been one for over fifty years. And I know, for a fact, that *most* of the preachers I talk to do not feel like members of their own congregations! They feel like employees. They feel expendable. They feel like outsiders.

I realize such statements are shocking to many of my readers. I don't think most Christians have a clue as to the insecurity and separated feeling that many preachers have. And, my view may be slightly skewed because I'm in the business I'm in. But I strongly believe that I know what I'm talking about.

Preachers have the feeling that they are always one business meeting away from termination. They sense that their children are viewed with more scrutiny than other children. They are expected to have fewer problems, be more spiritual, and have thicker skins than other Christians.

Maybe you just can't believe this. Call me cynical and misinformed. But I pray that some will listen.

A wonderful man in our congregation has been teaching a class on the church as the family of God for the past several weeks. It has been a great class. But I have sat silently each week, thinking that the things he was saying that apply to others, do not necessarily apply to preachers and their families.

He has said things like:

1. *"We should feel free to share our weaknesses as well as our strengths to all our brothers and sisters, because we are family."* (True indeed, *SHOULD* feel free. But I could name scores of preachers who have done such and gotten fired within the week.)
2. *"We can be ourselves with our brothers and sisters. There is no need to be pretentious. Family members accept us regardless. Blood is thicker than water, and in Christ we are all blood brothers."* (How I wish this were true. But again, I see the opposite when it comes to how preachers are viewed in their churches.)
3. *"Members of the family stand together, even in times of disagreement. That's what makes family so wonderful. NOTHING can make us cease to be family."* (The frequent terminations that take place each year have more of a feeling of *dis-fellowship* than a mere job dismissal.)
4. *"We have no need to fear our family. Enemies judge and condemn. Family members support and encourage. All the time!"* (I think if the truth be known, most church leaders get far more judgment from *within* the church than from without.)
5. And then the most naive of all: *"And suppose you've got some hidden problem, like alcoholism. If you confess that to your brothers and sisters they will be so sympathetic that they will love you even more and rally to your side."* (OK, all you alcoholic preachers, get ready to go public and receive the *love* that comes as a result.)

I have to honestly admit that I have experienced the feelings of an *outsider* during much of my public ministry. In fifty years of full-time preaching, I have served in a lot of fine congregations. But I only remember two of them that actually asked my family and me to *place membership*.

Oh, we've always been loved. I think, in every case, that the vast majority of the members were

accepting and cooperative. I'm not saying that I have not been *appreciated*. But that's still not the same as being fully *accepted* into the family. It doesn't take a whole lot to get some church people to turn against you.

That becomes most obvious when it's time to move on; whatever the reason. My experience is that preachers who move on continue to think of previous congregations in the same way they thought of them when they were there. But many church members seem to change in their feelings toward their "ex's." They have to start dealing with a new leader, and that means severing ties with the old one. They always saw the relationship as temporary, even if it lasted several years. "*Don't get too close, because they won't be here forever.*"

I could give *LOTS* of examples and *LOTS* of evidence, but I'm not bringing any of this up in order to be critical or negative. *I would love to make things better!* Perhaps pointing out a problem will help to resolve it.

And I'm fully aware of the fact that a lot of the problems that exist are the preacher's fault. When I was in Bible College I was warned by professors many times not to get too close to people in the congregation. I have not followed that advice. Sometimes it has hurt me, but most of the time I have found some brothers and sisters who wanted to be as close to me as I wanted to be to them. Many of you who receive this letter are in that category.

But preaching can be a lonely and isolated work. It has always been so. I think the prophets of Old and New Testaments would agree.

I just want to see Christians continuing to be as close as Paul apparently was with the Ephesian elders and as close as he was with the saints listed in Romans 16. Fellow-workers!

Jesus even said, He didn't come to find servants, but *friends*. His "own received Him not."

Those of you who pray for me and encourage me are a vital part of *MY* ministry. You are in *MY* family for sure. And I hope we can love each other and stick together even when we have different opinions and agendas. I especially appreciate your loving support after my two letters in June. God bless you.

In your local church, don't just assume that your preacher feels like a member of your congregation. Invite the ones into your lives who are giving so fully of theirs.

Yours in Christ,
Silas