

# To join or not to join

From the Editors in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



Daniel C. Richardson

St. Cyprian said that we can't have God as our Father if we don't have the church as our mother. It seems, however, that we live in an age in which people are less inclined to become church members—even when they are happy to have some church associations (see ["Loose connections"](#)). Perhaps it's the "mother" aspect that worries people—they don't want the church to act like a mother, telling them what

to do. They'd prefer to keep the church as a casual friend from which they can walk away at any time.

This desire to associate without joining the church seems especially true of people in their twenties and thirties. Their resistance to church membership may be part and parcel of a tendency to postpone major life commitments, like vocation, marriage and family—a tendency that may be an understandable response to economic uncertainties and the highly mobile nature of modern life.

Of course, the church has always had to deal with various levels of commitment. The church has the pastoral challenge of accepting people where they are while calling them to greater levels of commitment to the kingdom of God.

But these days, the notion of church membership is increasingly called into question. In many congregations, it's possible to serve in almost all leadership roles without formally becoming a member. So what's the point of membership?

Some churches have done away with traditional membership rolls and have instead introduced a covenant that people are encouraged to sign on an annual basis. The congregational covenants typically include some core beliefs, guidelines for Christian living and expectations about how one contributes to the life and mission of the church. Rather than asking people to make a onetime commitment, people are encouraged each year to ponder what being part of a congregation means and to renew their commitment to be an active part of Christ's body.

It appears, then, that indifference to formal church membership can, somewhat paradoxically, coexist with a renewed interest in being committed to the mission of a congregation (see ["Dismembership plan"](#)).

The new unease with membership is forcing the church to reconsider what membership is for—which in turn means reconsidering what church is for. And that reflection can only be good for the church.