

Worship

FAITH & VALUES

Theologians defend biblical importance of church membership

BY DAVID ROACH
BAPTIST PRESS

Church membership has fallen on hard times and Jonathan Leeman has watched the decline.

“We tend to have a me-and-Jesus view,” in which “the church is a nice option” and a “pragmatic help” but “not, strictly speaking, necessary,” said Leeman, president of 9Marks, a ministry that helps build healthy churches.

An “internet culture” that replaces church attendance with watching preachers online also “chips away” at church membership, as does “theological anemia” that dispenses with any facet of the Christian life not essential for salvation.

Leeman sees hope for recovering biblical church membership, where members comprise “an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel” as the Baptist Faith and Message puts it,

“People recognize the thin gruel that individualistic Christianity offers to enduring and growing in the faith,” he said. “You just don’t grow apart from other Christians. Christians recognize that, and they find joy, meaning and growth as they unite



Jonathan Leeman



Dwayne Milioni

together with other believers.”

With American culture drifting from church membership, recovery of biblical church membership is vital, say Leeman and other advocates of Baptist ecclesiology. The Bible teaches that every follower of Jesus, they say, should join a specific local body of believers that preaches the Gospel, practices church discipline and observes the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Church membership’s decline has been a long time in the making. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (73 percent) were church members in 1937, and that figure held steady at approximately 70 percent for the next six decades, according to Gallup polling. It dropped to 62 percent by 2010 and 49 percent by 2020.

Most of the decline in church membership occurred among religious Americans. Seventy-three percent who claimed to be religious belonged to a

church, synagogue or mosque in 2000, according to Gallup. That dropped to 60 percent in 2020. The age of churchless Christianity had arrived.

A defined membership is presumed in Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:2, where churches are commanded to remove sinning people. “Remove them from what?” Leeman asked. “Well, from membership in the church.”

Acts 2:41 references 3,000 baptized people being “added to them,” a reference to the Jerusalem church, Leeman said. The command in Hebrews 13:17 that believers obey and submit to their leaders implies a defined congregation with defined leaders. First Corinthians 10:17 teaches that the Lord’s Supper should be observed by a defined local church.

Additionally, “there is a clear organization that the New Testament gives for the local assembly,” said Dwayne Milioni, a North Carolina pastor and chairman of the board at the Pillar Network, a Baptist organization that equips, plants and revitalizes churches. The church’s organization, according to Philippians 1:1, includes defined members, “overseers” and “deacons.”

New Testament references to the church as a “household,” “brothers and

sisters” and sheep being shepherded also imply a defined membership, said Milioni, pastor of Open Door Church in Raleigh, North Carolina.

“I don’t think there is any doubt that there is what I would call very meaningful membership in the New Testament church,” Milioni said.

The requirement of meaningful church membership also means churches should remove people from their rolls at times rather than classifying them as inactive, he said.

Pastors “are going to be held accountable for everybody who is on our roll,” Milioni said. “God forbid that we have to stand before Jesus one day, and Jesus is going to say, ‘Hey, there are several hundred people that were on your church roll but you did nothing with. You didn’t shepherd them at all.’”

The de-emphasis of church membership likely indicates that some Christians misunderstand it, Leeman said.

“They are looking for something like country club membership or maybe Costco membership,” he said. “There is a payment of dues, and there is a signing of something. It’s all very programmatic. That’s not what the New

Testament gives us. Rather, when it speaks about membership, it uses all those beautiful images like a flock, a body, a household or family.”

Not everyone agrees on the importance of a defined local church membership.

Cameron Schweitzer, associate professor of historical theology at Gateway Seminary, agrees that church membership is “implied throughout the New Testament” and “a helpful way of creating some semblance of accountability.” However, “there is not an explicit chapter and verse in Thesalonians or Romans where Paul is going to say, ‘You all should have church membership.’” That leads Schweitzer to conclude churches without defined members are biblically permissible.

Among congregations with valid church order are Calvary Chapel congregations, he said, which have no membership rolls but define as part of their spiritual family anyone who regularly attends and has trusted Christ as Lord and Savior. Calvary Chapel congregations generally lack voting lists or membership processes.

One Calvary Chapel congregation in Virginia states on its website, “We do not practice church membership and we will

never ask you to ‘join’ Calvary Chapel. The church is a family to which you belong when you are ‘born again’ as a believer.”

Leeman and Milioni see it differently. Recovery of robust church membership, they say, is not only a biblical requirement but also a blessing.

“Assurance is one of those beautiful benefits we get from church membership,” Leeman said.

In addition to looking inward in self-examination and backward to their baptisms, believers “can also look around. Don’t you realize that the 250 other members who received you and affirmed you as a member” are saying, “Yes, we think [you] are a Christian”?

Milioni added that believers “don’t get all the privileges that are described in the Bible if you refuse to submit yourself to the authority of the local church.” Those privileges include “the care of shepherds,” the ability “to carry one another’s burdens” and participating in a spiritual family with opportunities to serve and give.

“The good gospel order that God has placed in the local church is wonderful,” he said, adding, “Give us a try.”

GO Ministries awaits decision on 44-acre site of retreat center

BY JACK BRAMMER
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

GO Ministries, a missionary organization that wants to use 44 acres near Simpsonville to establish a ministry retreat, has encountered opposition from elected community leaders and questions about traffic and safety issues at the site.

The organization, which owns the property and about 150 adjacent acres, will appear Aug. 27 before the Triple S Board of Adjustments and Appeals for a decision on its request. Following a three-hour, contentious public hearing July 30, the board decided to delay its decision and continue discussion.

GO wants its property in Shelby County to be a pastoral retreat and leadership renewal location called The Ridge. The project was created in collaboration with Blessing Ranch Ministries of Lutz, Florida, to care for, equip and refresh Christian leaders.

Among those speaking against the request for a conditional use permit on the property, which is zoned as agricultural, were Shelby County Judge-Executive Dan Ison and Judge-Executive-elect Rob Rothenburger.

A key question is Reed Lane, a one-lane road off Todd’s Point Road, that would be the access for the retreat cent. It is 11½ feet wide.

John Talbott, an attor-



Paxton Media Group file

John Talbott, an attorney for GO Ministries, spoke about the planned ministry retreat before a board of adjustments meeting last month in Shelby County.

ney for GO Ministries, said about 20 homes use Reed Lane, including tractors, farm equipment, delivery trucks and large vehicles. The GO traffic would be equivalent to three or four additional homes, he said.

“Participants arrive, stay several days and leave; not constant daily turnover.”

Construction impacts would be temporary and the condition of the road could be addressed

through possible management additions like expanding the road and building pull-off places every 500 feet, Talbott said.

The proposal calls for the construction of eight one-story, 1,000-square-foot cabins, an office for about five or six staffers in a 17,000 square-foot administrative and training facility, and a 4,500-square-foot chapel. A family with GO Ministries now lives in the house on

the property,

GO Ministries was established in 1991 by Brook Brotzman of Louisville and officially incorporated in Illinois in 1996. It moved its headquarters to Louisville in 1999. The organization focuses on church planting, medical care and sports outreach.

The GO property, formerly known as Boxwood Farm, was acquired last summer for \$3.3 million, according to online prop-

erty website Zillow.

At the board meeting, GO attorney Talbott said GO’s application for a permit for its Shelby County property is not rezoning, a commercial use, an event venue, summer camp, public lodging, a hotel, single-family, short-term rental or illegal use.

“The purpose is a church/ministry retreat use,” he said.

He added that more than 99 percent of the land will remain agricultural. If there is any future growth, he said, that would require additional approvals as required by law.

Talbott also argued, which was challenged by opponents, that the permit is for a church.

He cited Shelby County zoning regulations’ definition of a church: A facility used primarily for religious worship services that may secondarily provide social or community services such as counseling, childcare, senior services and educational programs. Several of those in opposition said Talbott was wrong.

Talbott also said the proposal features noise control and lighting restrictions.

Judge-Executive Ison called the proposal “a backdoor attempt to go around” the county’s Planning and Zoning Commission because it is not for a church but for a commercial-type development.

Judge-elect

Rothenburger urged the board to “turn down the permit.” He noted the debate on whether the proposal is a church and how safe is Reed Lane for more traffic.

Most of the speakers against the project argued it was not a church and that the road was not suitable for additional traffic.

The Rev. Dr. Jean Hawxhurst, ecumenical staff officer for the United Methodist Church, said GO is a public charitable organization and not a church, adding that she wants “to understand what appears to be a potentially questionable behavior for a Christian organization.”

She added: “In my opinion, the best thing they can do at this point is to re-think this project in a way, that Scripture calls us, cares for their neighbors.”

Other religious leaders support the GO proposal. They include Kyle Idleman, senior minister of Southeast Christian Church; former Southeast senior minister Dave Stone; and Jason Pace, pastor of Southeast’s Shelby County campus. Southeast’s website lists GO Ministries as one of its many international partners.

However, several speakers at the board meeting and writers of letters to the zoning office said they oppose the project and are members of Southeast.

WORSHIP CALENDAR

UPCOMING

St. James Community Picnic, 4-9 p.m. Aug. 22, St. James School campus, 401 Robinbrooke Blvd., E’town. Booths and food served beginning at 4 p.m. Mass 4:30 p.m. in school gym. Dance floor and free concert with Joshua McMillen and the Honky Tonk Wranglers 6:30-8:30 p.m. DJ Greg Milby

is emcee. Inflatables, Plinko, duck pond, game tickets required and can be purchased for a minimal fee. Free face painting, photo booth and balloon animals, cake wheel, silent auction with 30 themed baskets. Capital Prize Raffle drawing, 9 p.m. Fireworks at approximately 9:10 p.m. Shuttle available from the

parking lot to the picnic activities. POC: 270-766-8687.

2026 Women’s Equality Day Ceremony, 4 p.m. Aug. 23, All Nations Worship Ministries, 200 Vineland Centre Drive, Vine Grove, hosted by Pastors Michael and Gloria Fite to commemorate 106 years of women winning the right to

vote. Music by the Heartland Fillies. POC: Regina Parker, 270-312-0962.

Empowered to Overflow Revival, 7 p.m. Aug. 24-26 and 10:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. Aug. 27-28, Abundant Life Church, 1511 S. Dixie Blvd., Radcliff, featuring Pastor Terry Linscott and Pastor Russell Johnson. POC: 270-

351-9990.

Fall Prayer School, 6:30-7:45 p.m. Sept. 14-18, Abundant Life Church, 1511 S. Dixie Blvd., Radcliff. Real prayer principles and time to practice praying. Registration required by Sept. 13 atalcky.churchcenter.com/calendar/event/227887885?utm_. POC: 270-351-9990.

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