"Have it your way" syndrome

A critical analysis of the "church-hopper"

It seems every church has them. They are a small minority; yet, they are there. They have either just freshly entered a congregation or are in the process of making their exit. Indeed, upon careful evaluation, areas containing numerous reformed churches often display a membership rotation that mirrors a revolving door. Usually motivated by some rather minor dissatisfaction, the disgruntled individual or family vacates his or her own church's worship service setting out upon the path of "church-shopping." As the weeks of absence progress, perhaps the consistory, aware of the dissatisfaction and resulting absence, makes a call hears an expression of the person's desire to find a new church.

On the other church's end, there is notice of the new visitors and speculation concerning their ecclesiastical history and status. Talk fills the narthex and parking lot concerning reports of the visitors "not being happy" at the neighboring Reformed church. Since this is a fresh relationship, there is the extension and reciprocation of warm greetings. After a time of mutually uninvolved observation between the family and the prospective church, the family makes the decision, and a transfer request arrives at the soon to be "old church's" consistory table. The transfer of papers quietly takes place through the mail, the adjustment of the respective membership rolls takes place and ecclesiastical life continues.

However, what is the cost of this action? Is it simply the postage necessary for the paperwork of the transfer? Is the practice of "church-hopping" damaging to the individual and the church? Is this practice biblically valid and beneficial? Is it a symptom of spiritual weakness that ought to be pastorally addressed? It is the conviction of this article that the practice of "church-hopping" needs a biblical analysis and reform for the good of the church and the individual. The analysis will include a brief survey of the motives behind, the effects of, and the remedies associated with "church-hopping."

An analysis of the motives behind "church-hopping"

To offset the danger of setting forth an imbalanced view of membership transfer, it is beneficial to describe briefly proper requests for transfer. Certainly, if a church degenerates to the point of losing the marks of the true church, a transfer is legitimate and necessary. All men are "duty bound" to join the true Church (cf. Belgic Confession art. 28). Furthermore, differing convictions on points of non-essential theological issues can prompt members to transfer.

In addition, geographical moves necessitate and provide opportunity for legitimate membership transfers, as do marriages between individuals of different local Reformed congregations. There could also be a valid request from a member of a large and overflowing congregation who desires or sees it beneficial to join a smaller "daughter-church" or church plant for the good of all the parties involved.

However, at times the membership transfers in populated reformed circles do not fall under the examples described above. While the actual details may vary, multitudes of transfer requests flow from disagreements over minute matters. It may range from personality conflicts or preferences over varying pulpit styles, to grudges held over the way some housekeeping decision went. Rather than taking an attitude of humility and submission for the good of the body and the glory of Christ (cf. Philippians 2:3, 4), the individual or family pulls up their ecclesiastical tent pegs and moves on

to supposedly greener pastures. This behavior can develop into a dangerous pattern. Tent pegs pulled up once become easier to pull up again and the dangerous temptation of church drifting arises.

The problem with such membership transfers is not the simple movement of members from one congregation to another, but the attitude of the heart that perhaps motivates the transfer. Individuals must remember that church membership is not exclusively *receptive,* but rather primarily *active* in nature. This is not a denial of a receptive benefit from church membership, but rather an attempt to correct a common imbalance by stating that church membership is not exclusively receptive. The apostle Paul emphasizes the active nature of church membership when he writes,

> "...the whole body, joined and knit together **by what every joint supplies**, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

> (Ephesians 4:16)

Furthermore, we do well to remember that the biblical characterization of church membership is one of *humble activity* rather than *selfish receptivity.* Paul emphasizes this truth in Ephesians 4:1-3 stating that the Christian is

> "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" and have a heart characterized by "lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another."

This distinction between *humble activity* and *selfish receptivity* is what helps separate the proper requests for transfer from the improper requests. A person leaving a false church for the true Church, making a geographical move, or transferring from a large church to a "daughter-church" usually realizes and is committed to the humble and active nature of church membership. By contrast, a person transferring over personal dissatisfaction or disagreement with some minor aspect of a local congregation is often imbalanced with a selfish and receptive attitude towards church membership. This difference reveals itself in the common language of "I'm not happy at my church because..." compared to a nearly unheard of "I will be obeying God by transferring" or "I sense I could be of more service to God there because..."

An analysis of the effects of "church-hopping"

The practice of "church-hopping" has negative effects upon both the individual and the church. For the good of the Church, we should examine these effects and the practices behind them and, if need be, correct them.

Concerning individuals and families, the quietly accepted practice of allowing "church-hopping" permits the unbiblical mentality of exclusive selfish receptivity towards church membership to continue unchallenged. If a person attends a church simply for what he can get out of it, he is unbalanced and in need of biblical alignment concerning the nature of church membership. If an individual is governed in his ecclesiastical selection merely by how well the body responds to his likes and preferences, it is hard to understand how he is busy doing his share to cause growth for the body (cf. Ephesians 4:16).

The Belgic Confession states in article 28 that the proper attitude towards church membership is

> "as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren..."

Likewise, the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes in question #55 that the Christian is to

> "feel himself bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and welfare of other members."

Before exiting his or her "old church," the disgruntled individual ought to stand before the biblical truths of the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism concerning church membership and examine if they are operating with a biblical mindset.

One danger of simply ignoring the common practice of "church-hopping" is that it allows a person to drift from congregation to congregation without seriously addressing his imbalanced mindset. This robs the Church of the benefits that person might bring if he used his gifts for the good of the body. It also allows the person to rob himself of the benefits of a positive, contributive perspective to membership within a church.

Related to the first problem with "church-hopping" is the danger that in reality "church-hopping" membership transfers are usually the simple transfer of a problem. Upon a "church-hopper's" transfer, it is likely that the former dissatisfaction that blossomed out of the root problem of *selfish receptivity* will eventually flower again once the new ecclesiastical courtship and honeymoon are over. Chances are that the pattern of transfer will continue if the attitude behind the pattern remains unaddressed. Moreover, the attitude is often unaddressed as the "former church" feels relief at the disgruntled member's departure and the "new church" is glad to add a number to the membership role.

Nevertheless, the danger in this situation is that the improper and unbiblical attitude towards church membership that often motivates "ecclesiastical roaming" remains unaddressed. In light of Christ's command in Matthew 5:22, 23,

> *"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*

As Reformed churches, we need to ask ourselves honestly if we are allowing individuals who harbor animosity against former congregations, past office-bearers, or fellow Christians to exist in our congregation without them receiving the necessary biblical confrontation.

A third damaging effect of "church-hopping" is a mentality that often is gradually impressed upon the individual's posterity. We live in a day and age of little loyalty. While our ancestors often spent their entire lives driving one brand of automobile, living in one home, and working at one place of employment in addition to being baptized, married and buried in one congregation, our generation displays an unending shift from one thing to the next. While such fluidity is defensible in relationship to vehicles, homes, and employment, it is not healthy for ecclesiastical affiliation.

The gravest danger for the individual who is a "church-hopper" is that the disease of ecclesiastical dissatisfaction along with the symptom of a lack of church loyalty is contagious and will be caught in a more radical form by the generations to come. It is no surprise when a young person raised in a childhood environment of minute complaining and frequent transferring takes a complete exit from the parent's revolving door of ecclesiastical affiliation. Sadly, children who follow along upon such parental ecclesiastical roaming, who often hear the expressed complaints against the local church, run a higher risk of setting up their own tents pegs outside of ecclesiastical land altogether. Families that leave a trail of "church-hopping" transfers need pastoral admonitions concerning the effects their practices may have on impressionable children.

The practice of "church hopping" impacts consistories negatively also. One of the main negative influences of "church-hoppers" upon consistories is the undermining of an ability to admonish pastorally. Whether it be from the pulpit, on family visitation, in private conversations or consistory decisions, Scripture is clear that the office-bearers of the Church of Christ must frequently admonish individuals within the congregation (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14).

However, receiving admonishment is difficult for the human nature. It is especially difficult for a human nature characterized by selfish receptivity. Nevertheless, it is especially the selfishly receptive human nature that is in need of admonishment (cf. Philippians 2:1-4ff). The pastoral dilemma is that the person who is in need of biblical admonishment often is most opposed to it and

most likely to make an ecclesiastical "bolt for the door" when confronted with it. One wonders how many pastors and elders have refrained from offering a necessary, biblical admonishment for fear that the confronted party might be motivated to the practice of "church-hopping." Indeed, this is a negative impact of "church-hopping."

The discouraging and frustrating dilemma is magnified when the individual does "bolt for the door" is response to a necessary admonishment and then is politely received into the membership of a neighboring congregation. In such cases, it seems that the person in need of admonishment slips through the cracks of ecclesiastical disharmony while the admonishing consistory, who was simply seeking to be faithful to God, is left with an undeserved reputation of being a contentious consistory.

In summary, it is rather easy to identify several harmful effects associated with the practice of "church-hopping." In contrast, one would be hard pressed to offer one positive effect for the individual or the congregation.

An analysis of the remedies for "church-hopping"

It seems that the simple step of honest consistory investigation and communication would go far in curbing the practice of "church-hopping." The investigation would be as simple as the receiving consistory asking a few pointed questions of the members requesting transfer about the motivation behind their request. Questions, such as, "Why are you proposing to leave your church," or "Are you not already members of that Reformed church," would quickly reveal whether an individual or family is transferring because of and with an attitude that is one of *humble activity* or *selfish receptivity.* Further questions such as, "Can you leave on good terms in full brotherly love with everyone within that congregation" or "were there any recent events within your church that are prompting this transfer" could also be helpful in identifying the motivation behind membership transfer requests.

An important qualifier related to the asking of these questions is that the investigative consistory would have to be poised to defend their neighboring consistory's good name and admonish the interviewed individual of their duty to bear with the shortcomings of their consistory in light of the fifth commandment if need be. Furthermore, the consistory would have to be ready and willing to instruct the prospective transferring individual to endeavor

> "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" and remind them that there is "one body and one Spirit."

(Ephesians 4:3, 4)

It is not only the receiving church that has an investigative responsibility. There is also a proper and legitimate place for the sending consistory to investigate the motivation behind the membership transfer request by way of questions. Often the individual's response to the mere process of discussing motivations for transferring will reveal the spirit behind the request. If they would refuse or hesitate at such a conversation with their current consistory, that would seem to indicate that the transfer request flows from a heart out of line with the requirements of the fifth commandment. This should also serve as an alarming indication for the receptive consistory.

If the investigative action was carried out faithfully, the next logical step would be for cooperative, consistorial communication. This step would imply something more than the signing and mailing of an official transfer and the return of a receipt. While sending a family to the "new country" with their ecclesiastical papers in hand may have been suitable for immigrants in the nineteenth century, our age of technology affords us convenient opportunity for mutual communication. A simple phone call, email, or coffee visit between delegates from respective consistories to share the information gleaned during the investigative meetings would begin to reduce improper membership transfers.

While investigation and communication between consistories would be beneficial in curbing improper membership transfers, another remedy would be a return to the ideology of boundaries or

ecclesiastical districts. This would work more appropriately within churches belonging to the same federation, but could be implemented to a certain degree among like-minded confessional, Reformed churches. Some may be quick to object that church membership is voluntary in nature. However, the way this commitment to the ideology of boundaries could work would be a simple *consistorial encouragement* for members to associate with the churches of their federation that are of the closest geographical proximity. A commitment to the ideology of boundaries or districts would greatly eliminate the practice of "church-hopping." In addition, it would make ecclesiastical life simpler.

Too often, improper motives drive the membership transfers within densely populated reformed communities. This practice is bound to have damaging effects on the individuals and congregations involved. However, simple consistorial investigation and communication in relation to these requests along with a commitment to the ideology of ecclesiastical boundaries would begin to address the problem in a positive manner for the good of all involved.

Greg Lubbers