

In May, we had the great pleasure to witness two confirmands, Micah and John, confirm their faith and take the membership vows to join the church. But, what do those vows really mean?

There are three parts to the membership vow. First, we accept God's grace and profess our faith in Christ. Secondly, we vow to resist evil and oppression in whatever forms they manifest. In other words, we try not to sin nor cause harm to others. We stand up for those who are being oppressed by someone else, especially if they can't speak on their own behalf. The last vow agrees to support the church with our presence, prayers, gifts, service, and witness. This month, we will explore what it really means in each of these areas when we take this vow.

Today, we'll explore what it means to support the church with our Presence. (Referring to the cartoon on the screen) As this cartoon suggests, when you vow to support the church with your Presence, you are saying that you will show up at least "some" of the time.

However, "When Woody Allen said that '80 percent of success is showing up,' he wasn't talking about worship. There's more to being present in worship than simply showing up on Sunday morning."<sup>1</sup> Showing up is important, especially in our culture today, when only 33% of Americans attend a worship service once or twice a month.<sup>2</sup> But, there's a difference between attendance and presence.

We all know this, right? We've all had conversations with people when we know they aren't really present. They aren't listening. Sometimes, I like to put on my "mom" hat on the way home from church and ask the boys what they thought about a

particular point in the sermon, hoping to encourage them further in their faith. But, a great silence falls in the car, and when I press further, one of them admits, "I sorta wasn't listening" or, "I kinda zoned out at that part." We can't be tuned in all the time but vowing to be present is more than just attending.

Vowing to support the church with your presence means being fully present with God and with others during Worship and Small-group community. Our scripture says it this way: "Let us approach with a **true heart** in full assurance of faith" v. 22. A true heart is being open to God's presence and the presence of others -- listening to them, making a priority for them. We get a clear conscience by confessing our shortcomings and asking them for forgiveness. We encourage and support one another in the love of Christ.

When we gather together for worship, we come from our ordinary lives and experience something extraordinary together. We turn our attention away from ourselves toward God. We are awakened out of the tired routines of our lives to what God has done and is continuing to do, in us and in our world. "Worship is not a performance we watch [or a service we attend], but an experience we share"<sup>3</sup> together in community.

We can study the scriptures and pray by ourselves. We can serve by ourselves. We can have spiritual experiences through meditation or practicing yoga or watching a sunrise or sunset. We can feel God's presence in the gentle breeze in nature or with the rolling in of ocean waves. However, we cannot experience the fullness of Christ's presence without being part of a community.

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<sup>1</sup> James Harnish, *A Disciple's Path*, 2018, location 825.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>

<sup>3</sup> Harnish, location 825

We experience God through each other. God chooses to work through people, and those people encourage us, guide us, share their wisdom, and keep us accountable. Our presence in the lives of others and their presence in ours helps us to grow our faith. As we grow, we become part of God's transformation of the world.

We see this throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, being part of God's community was in the lineage of Abraham and Sarah, God's chosen people. Most of the Old Testament stories revolve around the Israelites as a community, as a people, in which God called together. God sends someone like Moses and the prophets to guide them and encourage them to stay on the path back to God. God sends someone to share wisdom and keep them accountable.

In the New Testament, being part of God's community is through Christ. When we accept God's grace and commit our lives to Christ, we take our place in the body of Christ. Our salvation is not a solo ticket to heaven when we die. We don't just make the decision to accept Christ's love to get into heaven, and then don't attempt to live a Christian life or grow in our faith with others while we're here. When we profess or confirm our faith, we take our place and answer the call that God has placed on our lives as part of the body of Christ. We become part of God's community, where "we learn to love God and others and how to participate in God's transformation of the world."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the Scriptures, we can look at our history and see God working in our roots of the Church. The Methodist movement began in a small group. John and Charles Wesley, came together with college friends to pray together, read scripture together, take communion together, serve together, and encourage one another in

growing their faith. They created a method on how to practice their faith, to put it into action, and they experienced God through their actions and through each other.

It matters that we show up, even if it's just "some" of the time. Our presence makes a difference. Our presence with God and with one another is how we hold on to hope; it's how we carry on in this life; it's how we learn and grow our faith; it's how we become a part of the transformation of the world.

I know the Church is not perfect and many folks have stopped attending because they were hurt by the Church or didn't find an authentic community. I know I left because of that reason, but I can tell you from experience, that I wasn't happier after I left. It made things worse. I can think of three people right now, and I'm sure you can too, who stopped attending Worship or a small-group for whatever reason, and they are miserable. They feel so alone and isolated. I felt the same way when I tried to live my life on my own without God or a supportive community.

I'm reading a book by James Harnish called *The Disciple's Path* that really digs into the membership vows, and it gives a lot of history and explanation of the Wesleyan understanding of grace. I recommend this book if you really want to know more than what I can cover in a short sermon. Harnish writes this passage about the importance of Presence at worship for him, and as I read it, see if you agree: "There are times when I come to worship to affirm the faith that I hold, but there are other times when I come to worship so that the faith the church affirms can hold me. There are times when I come to sing my song of hope, but there are other times when I need the church to sing that song for me. There are times when I am present with my small group in order to

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<sup>4</sup> Harnish.

encourage someone else, and there are times when I need to be present so they can encourage me.”<sup>5</sup>

We vow to be fully present with God and with each other, and we vow to allow others to be present with us. We “show up” for God and for others, and they both “show up” for us. When we vow to support the church with our presence, we vow to do our part in the body of Christ for the transformation of the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Harnish, *A Disciple's Path Companion Reader*, location 775.