



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 "Membered and Remembered"
(*Membership*, pp. 27-34)

Suggested Article:

📖 "Mapping the Life Together"
(*Membership*, pp. 88-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Membered and Remembered

In Wendell Berry's fiction about "the Port William membership," the Pauline theme of membership in Christ finds an analog in a quotidian fellowship of farmers. From stories of their membership we can draw important lessons in church membership.

Prayer

O Trinity, our God who is yourself Community, who created us in your image, teach us how to be united under the banner of your love. Teach us how to walk in faith to love and serve you, to love and serve one another. Remind us of your image in us, and draw us to one another. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:19-22

Meditation[†]

A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.

Wendell Berry

Reflection

Some important dimensions of church membership are depicted narratively in Wendell Berry's stories about a fictional farming community, Port William, KY. Brent Laytham gleans these six insights about membership from Berry's stories.

- ▶ *Membership includes everything in God's kindly purposes.* As the character Burley puts it, "...we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't."

Does this view confuse membership with creatureliness? Berry is saying "we are woven into a belonging that precedes and grounds us, that produces and guides us, that beckons and blesses us," Latham responds. "Put theologically, membership in Christ presupposes our shared origin as members with all creatures of God's very good creation, which includes our shared destiny in the renewal of all things."

- ▶ *Membership is given before it is chosen.* To Elton, a proud farmer who resents accepting land he cannot afford, Wheeler Catlett explains, "The way you got in... was by being chosen. The way you stay in it is by choice. ...[We] can't exist at all except as gifts." While we realize we haven't earned our place in the Church, Latham notes, "the pervasive voluntarism and consumerism that distort our culture inexorably press us toward imagining and thus living as if we chose our membership (voluntarism) and that choice made it ours (consumerism)."
- ▶ *Membership requires a common good and a common place.* Berry's characters work *in* and *for* their community. When Paul says we are given gifts "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7), he means to serve a particular group in a particular place. "Modern mobility has trained us to be relatively indifferent to where we are, to treat places more like interchangeable widgets or consumer goods than like



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treasures to be cherished,” Latham laments. “Our church membership must learn to work in, with, and for its place.”

- ▶ *Memberships subsists in shared labors and loves.* The character Hannah Coulter discovers “rhymed labors” – small tasks that cause her to remember past labors and co-laborers – are “a comfort ever and always, like hearing the rhyme come when you are singing a song.” Many acts of worship and works of mercy in Church are like this; they bind us together with other members, present and past.
- ▶ *Membership requires gifted rememberers.* Latham adds remembrance to the list of spiritual gifts. The rememberer’s mantle can be passed from one generation to another. “We need rememberers exercising the gift of remembrance to ‘quote [the dead] in their own voices at appropriate times...[and] to call the absent into presence.’ We need gifted rememberers to keep alive in their minds the minds of our saints.”
- ▶ *Membership extends beyond our knowing.* “The connection of the body of Christ through time is more than...our capacity to keep previous members ‘alive’ in our memories,” Latham writes. “What truly connects us...is Christ’s remembering – ‘the care of a longer love than any...have ever imagined.’”

We are called to *realize* this larger community through our active remembering. Several characters have visions of their fraying, quarrelsome Port William re-remembered in perfection. In one of these, Andy Catlett realizes “all apologies come too late” for the heartache, suffering, and sin in the community. Yet “it seemed...almost a proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its sorrow. [And so]... he was thinking of heavenly pity, heavenly forgiveness, and his thought was a confession of need. It was a prayer.” Indeed, Latham says, “Berry’s final lesson for us is of a remembering love that includes us in its forgiveness, of ‘a light that includes our darkness,’ of a love that ‘overflows the allowance of the world,’ so that we will finally be ‘corrected and clarified.’”

Study Questions

1. Membership is both something that we *receive* and something we *do*. How are these two aspects related? How does membership fray when we neglect one of these dimensions?
2. Membership involves both serving a common good in a particular place, and having gifted rememberers who connect us with members in other times and places. How well does your congregation accomplish these aspects of membership?
3. Discuss the “rhymed labors” that bind together your congregation’s membership.
4. Consider Debra Dean Murphy’s observation in light of this discussion of membership and your experience: “In recent years a counterintuitive idea has gained traction: perhaps people desire more rigor, not less, in their experience of church life. Maybe ancient, corporate disciplines like *lectio divina* or praying the Psalms or confessing our sins to one another have a renewed appeal in this age of digital loneliness. It might be...that church members long for accountability and the demands (and joys) of discipleship.”

Departing Hymn: “One in Jesus”

† Wendell Berry, “The Loss of the Future,” in *The Long-Legged House* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012 [1969]), 53-74, here citing 71.

Membered and Remembered

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the lessons of church membership that Latham draws from Wendell Berry's stories about the fictional town of Port William, KY.
2. To relate the giftedness of membership to the activities we do to sustain it.
3. To discuss how your congregation can realize a richer level of membership.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Membership (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

In Wendell Berry's stories about Port William, KY, a few characters have visions that re-member the community, perfected and whole. The barber, grave digger, and church janitor Jayber Crow has this vision at the end of a day working in the cemetery and remembering the dead.

What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. ... It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time.... I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness as it is said we may be perfected by grace.

And so there we all were on a little wave of time lifting up to eternity, and none of us ever in time would know what to make of it. How could we? It is a mystery....

Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2000) 205

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 2:19-22 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study we continue to explore the Pauline view of church membership, but now through the helpful analogue of Wendell Berry's novels and stories about the "Port William membership." If group members are familiar with Berry's writings, encourage them to elaborate Brent Latham's six lessons with examples of their own. Everyone can appreciate the insightful lessons and use them to appreciate and enrich the membership in the congregation.

Study Questions

1. Assign two small groups to sift the lessons that Brent Laytham has gleaned from Wendell Berry's stories for these two dimensions of membership. When they report their findings, consider how important each dimension is for the membership.

Berry repeatedly stresses that membership is a gift. This is evident in several lessons: we are members, in some sense, before we know it; we were chosen by God, before we chose to embrace the membership; the membership thrives in shared labors; our re-membering the membership is the exercise of a gift; and the membership extends beyond our knowing.

On the other hand, we are called to actions that realize and deepen the membership: we discern the universal reach of membership; we embrace the membership given to us; we embrace and learn to care for the common good and particular place of our membership; we participate in the shared labors and encourage the gifted rememberers; and we strive to actively remember and embrace the larger community that extends beyond our knowing (in other congregations, Christian traditions, eras, and so on).

Ingratitude can close us off to the gift of membership; inactivity can diminish its realization in the present place and time. Yet the gift of membership precedes and ultimately redeems all of our doings.

2. There is some tension between these two aspects of membership, which stress the local and the more global aspects of the Church, respectively. Yet there are many connections; for instance, how a congregation is meeting a local need now might echo how previous generations dealt with that need. You might divide into two groups to treat the aspects separately, and then see what specific connections members find between the two. Discuss specific ways that the congregation might strengthen each aspect of membership.
3. Latham gives several examples: "Perhaps in kneeling at an old altar rail, or singing an old and favorite hymn, or praying an ancient prayer, we may experience the rhyme that Hannah Coulter names: us doing now in the same place what those with whom we are membered together in love did here before us and taught us to do. Perhaps the most obvious 'rhymes' of our Christian labor and love are the practices of baptism and communion." Encourage members to think of labors that "rhyme" with Christians in other eras and cultures, of labors that "rhyme" mainly with your own congregation's past members, and labors that "rhyme" with personal and family experiences that members have had through the years.
4. Have members experienced the phenomenon that Debra Dean Murphy is describing? The resources that she reviews will point them to it. Notice that the desire for "more rigor, not less, in their experience of church life" has two aspects: a longing to be connected to other Christians through "ancient, corporate disciplines" and a longing for "accountability" to other members, past and present. These believers are shifting away from individualism toward community that transcends their individual's choice and design. They seem to hunger for the "rhymed labors" that the character Hannah Coulter discovered. They feel the need for the gifted rememberers who can faithfully point them to the larger membership they would welcome.

Departing Hymn

"One in Jesus" is on pp. 44-45 of *Membership*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.