

10 Symptoms of a Selfish Church Member

Discover the attitudes church members need to make the most difference.

"I Want It My Way, Right Now, Without Compromise"

So I thought I might begin this chapter by giving an illustration of my boys fussing and fighting because they wanted something their way. But then I begin to think how many times I fought with my own older brother because I wanted it my way, right now, without compromise.

I could be a selfish brat. It's good we grow out of that phase after we become adults. Right? It's even better that we never revert to that phase after we become Christians. Right? Wrong!

When Adults Throw Temper Tantrums in Church

Christians can sometimes act just like those demanding children who want things their way. Temper tantrums in churches may not include church members lying on the floor kicking and screaming, but some come close.

But the strange thing about church membership is that you actually give up your preferences when you join. Don't get me wrong; there may be much about your church that you like a lot.

But you are there to meet the needs of others. You are there to serve others. You are there to give. You are there to sacrifice. Get the picture?

An Example of a "Me First" Moment in the Bible

Jesus would often say things that confounded His listeners.

You see, even His disciples had a tendency to fight with one another. On one occasion the Twelve were arguing about who was the greatest. Can you imagine that? The closest followers of Jesus were having a "me first" fight. The Bible says that Jesus stopped and sat down and called these grown men together. "Sitting down, He called the Twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all'" (Mark 9:35).

Ouch. I would have loved to have been a fly on a cloak and seen their expressions. *Yep, He got you this time, you self-serving disciples.* And then it hits me. **That text is for me as well.** As a church member, my motivation should not be to get my preferences to the top of the list. I am supposed to be last, not first. I am supposed to be a servant instead of seeking to be served.

A Survey That Said a Lot

My research team recently conducted a survey of churches that were inwardly focused. For the most part, they were not serving past their own walls and their own members. In other words, these churches were largely self-serving.

In our survey we found 10 dominant behavior patterns of members in these churches. See if you recognize any:

1. Worship Wars

One or more factions in the church want the music just the way they like it. Any deviation is met with anger and demands for change. The order of service must remain constant. Certain instrumentation is required while others are prohibited.

2. Prolonged Minutia Meetings

The church spends an inordinate amount of time in different meetings. Most of the meetings deal with the most inconsequential items, while the Great Commission and Great Commandment are rarely the topics of discussion.

3. Facility Focus

The church facilities develop iconic status. One of the highest priorities in the church is the protection and preservation of rooms, furniture and other visible parts of the church's buildings and grounds.

4. Program Driven

Every church has programs even if they don't admit it. When we start doing a ministry a certain way, it takes on programmatic status. The problem is not with programs. The problem develops when the program becomes an end instead of a means to greater ministry.

5. Inwardly Focused Budget

A disproportionate share of the budget is used to meet the needs and comforts of the members instead of reaching beyond the walls of the church.

6. Inordinate Demands for Pastoral Care

All church members deserve care and concern, especially in times of need and crisis. Problems develop, however, when church members have unreasonable expectations for even minor matters. Some members expect the pastoral staff to visit them regularly merely because they have membership status.

7. Attitudes of Entitlement

This issue could be a catch-all for many of the points named here. The overarching attitude is one of demanding and having a sense of deserving special treatment.

8. Greater Concern About Change than the Gospel

Almost any noticeable changes in the church evoke the ire of many; but those same passions are not evident about participating in the work of the gospel to change lives.

9. Anger and Hostility

Members are consistently angry. They regularly express hostility toward the church staff and other members.

10. Evangelistic Apathy

Very few members share their faith on a regular basis. More are concerned about their own needs rather than the greatest eternal needs of the world and community in which they live.

Church Membership from a Biblical Perspective

In almost every behavior above, church members were looking out for their own needs and preferences. *I want the music my way. I want the building my way. I am upset because the pastor didn't visit me. I don't want to change anything in my church.*

You get the picture. I. Me. Myself.

Church membership from a biblical perspective, however, is about servanthood. It's about giving. It's about putting others first.

Excerpted from I Am a Church Member by Thom S. Rainer.

5 Tell-Tale Signs Your Congregation Is Insider-Focused

So many churches that aren't growing wonder why they're not growing.

Maybe you've wondered the same thing about your church or a friend's church.

Of course, people point to many reasons why their church isn't growing

(I cover [10 frequent reasons in this post](#)), but underneath all of them is one root cause: insider-focus.

Churches that stop growing almost always have lost their heart for outsiders.

Even if many say they're still passionate about reaching new people, their actions deny their intentions.

So how do you know whether your church is focused on insiders?

Here are 5 tell-tale signs:

[Churches that stop growing almost always have lost their heart for outsiders.](#)

1. Personal preference drives decision-making

In insider-focused churches, member preference rules. Everything from the preaching to the music to the programming gets evaluated through the lens of whether people 'like' it or not.

As a result, people-pleasing rules. As soon as a church leader hears that member X isn't happy, the expectation is that the leader will try to placate the member or make the changes necessary to keep him or her attending.

The challenge is there is *zero* objective standard.

The standard is whether people like it.

As a leader, you end up playing whack-a-mole because different people 'like' different things, and no one can agree on what they like. Which is exactly why churches end up adding far too much variety to their services and too much programming to their menus.

In your attempt to please everyone, you please no one. And besides, [as I outline in this post](#), your church can't be for everyone anyway.

Regardless, if personal preference drives decision-making, you will always make bad decisions.

[If personal preference drives decision-making, you will always make bad decisions.](#)

2. Emotion trumps mission

Insider-focused churches have a mission, it's just that no one lives by it because emotion trumps mission.

How does that happen?

Because members are so bent on pleasing themselves, discussion about future direction becomes very emotional: it becomes about what people feel, who's happy, who's not happy, who's thinking of leaving, who might stay if X changes, and what would need to happen for people to be satisfied again.

As a result, leaders make emotional decisions trying to appease the unappeasable, and congregations react in kind: *emotionally*.

Lost in all of this is one thing: the mission to reach people.

[Insider-focused churches have a mission, but no one lives by it when emotion trumps mission.](#)

3. Sacrifice is non-existent

In an insider-focused church, no one sacrifices anything for the sake of others, because people believe others ought to sacrifice to please them.

If the church exists to make you happy, why wouldn't people sacrifice more to make you happier?

In outsider-focused churches, the opposite is true.

Insiders sacrifice for the sake of outsiders. They realize that when they give, others live. That when they decide the church isn't about them, they find a joy that is so elusive to selfish people.

Externally focused churches realize that sacrifice for the sake of others is a pathway to joy.

Internally focused congregations never understand that.

[Externally focused Christians realize that when they give, others live.](#)

4. Any growth is mostly transfer growth

Do some internally-focused churches grow? Sure...that can happen.

But it's not *real* growth. It's not mission-induced growth.

In an insider-focused church, almost all the growth that takes place (if any happens at all) is transfer growth. Not the kind of transfer growth that happens when a new Christian family comes to town or a family makes a once-in-a-decade move to a new church.

The transfer growth that insider-focused churches usually attract is the kind of growth that attracts [serial church shoppers](#).

And guess what transfer growth often looks for? A church to make them happy. (I wrote a post on the [challenges of transfer growth here](#).)

Best wishes with trying to make them happy.

[In an insider-focused church, almost all the growth that takes place is transfer growth.](#)

5. Innovation is dead or on life-support

Most insider-focused congregations aren't excited about the future, they're afraid of it.

For the most part, insider-focused churches cling stubbornly to the present or the past, preferring the way things are or the way things used to be over the way things could be.

As a result, innovation dies. New ideas are shot down. Anything that would reach people who currently aren't being reached is viewed with suspicion or even called 'unfaithful.'

Members end up liking their church 'just the way it is,' which usually means they like it smaller and smaller every year.

[Insider-focused congregations aren't excited about the future, they're afraid of it.](#)

So What's the Antidote?

The antidote to insider-focus is simple: your mission.

[The antidote to insider-focus is simple: your mission.](#)

One of the best ways to refocus your mission is this: focus on who you want to reach, not on who you want to keep. I learned that truth years ago from my friend [Reggie Joiner](#), a co-founder of [North Point Church](#) and now CEO of [Orange](#). Reggie is so right.

An external focus will beat insider drift every day, all day.

So, shift your focus. Focus on who you want to reach, not who you want to keep.

Will you anger some members? Yes. But they will have other churches to go to. The unchurched don't.