

CHURCH ROLLS NEED TO BE REVISED ON A REGULAR BASIS

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Roll revision is a task in which every church should engage – ideally annually. However, the temptation is to put off the task with the result that the church rolls often list a number of people who may be ‘in membership’ but are not actually ‘in fellowship’. This is a nonsense. Painful though it may be, roll revision is good for the church. It encourages integrity - it just isn’t honest for a church in its annual returns to the Baptist Union to claim more members than they actually have attending the church. It encourages commitment - it is difficult to urge people to take their membership responsibilities seriously, when there are members who have not attended the church for several years! It also encourages growth - growing churches for the most part are churches with high commitment, where "membership is not viewed as a destination, but rather as a pilgrimage that leads one towards unreserved discipleship and a higher level of religious commitment" (Lyle Schaller). But how in practice do we go about revising the roll? There was a stage in the life of our church when we had to engage in some fairly substantial roll revision. Before we set about the task we agreed the following ‘non-rigorous’ guidelines. “First of all, when members move out of the area, they will be encouraged to link up with another church as soon as possible. If no request for a transfer or commendation has come through within six months, the pastoral deacon will write or telephone with a view to yet again encouraging the process of commitment to another church. Once members have left the area for more than a period of twelve months, their membership will normally lapse. Secondly, when members living in the area do not attend our church at all in a twelve-month period, they will be visited, and unless there is some good reason (e.g. ill health or old age), their membership will lapse. However, their names will be retained in the church handbook in the category of friends for a further period of two years, after which the matter will be reviewed”. These guidelines are ‘non-rigorous’ in the sense that they are far less draconian than those adopted by some churches. As a teenager, for instance, I belonged to a Baptist church where – in theory at least – if you had not attended a communion service for three months, then you would be visited by a deacon; and if you had not attended for six months, then your name would be automatically deleted from the membership roll (those were the days when members had to put into the offering bag their communion tickets – in this way absences could be duly noted!). Needless to say, when we prune the roll, we hope that the process will result not in the deletion of a name, but in restoration to fellowship. Yes, roll revision is painful, and yet - in the words of Jesus' parable of the vine - a branch is pruned "to make it bear more fruit" (John 15.2).

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