

# Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 29

## How to Encourage People toward a Church-Membership Decision

**Why are we gifting you this volume?** Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) for subscription information.

**Purpose of this Volume:** Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding (1) non-threatening ways clergy and congregations can ask people to make a decision for Christ and church membership and (2) material that pastors can hand to laypersons who ask, “How do you answer someone who says ...?”

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## I. Principles and Procedures for Effective Decision-Conversations

At every leadership seminar that discusses how to do evangelistic outreach, or how to invite people to Christ, or how to ask people to transfer their church membership, at least one attendee asks, “How do you answer someone who says ...?” The last part of their question usually contains one of thirty-eight classic rationalizations for not joining a church.

**A. Identifying the Twelve Excuses most often Used by People in Our Community.** In the typical American community, the first twelve excuses on pages 6-12 are the most frequently heard. Less often—but occasionally—you hear one of the twenty-six excuses on pages 13-23.

To precisely determine which excuses are the most prevalent in *your community*, use the following procedure:

- Ask each staff member and layperson during a group meeting or training session to (a) spend seven minutes of individual study scanning the list of thirty-eight excuses and (b) checking the ones they hear most often.
- While they do that, write numbers one through thirty-eight on a chalkboard.
- Then, read aloud each of the excuses and ask people in the group to raise their hands if they have frequently heard that one.
- Count the number of raised hands and write the total beside that excuse on the chalkboard.

This gives you the “top twelve” excuses that they are most likely to hear from people in this community.

How should we respond to these excuses? Should we respond at all? That depends on several variables—how well we know the person, the type of social situation, etc.—but we cannot respond at all unless we have something with which to respond.

Ask members of the group to study for a few minutes, and then discuss, the following paragraphs and the answers under the top twelve excuses they are “most likely to hear from people in our community.”

**B. Distinguish between Relationship-Building and Decision-Conversations!** These are two entirely different matters, requiring very different procedures. In what many congregations have called the “relation-building” or “cultivation call” in the homes of worship visitors, pay little attention to the excuses that people give for their present non-affiliation with a church.

Acknowledge that you heard the excuse—perhaps with just enough pause to let people hear in the silence their excuse’s emptiness—then move the conversation on to other matters. Avoid reinforcing and strengthening the excuses by giving them conversational attention.

These people have been attending worship for some time, and you are asking for an initial commitment to Christ or a membership transfer decision—probably for next Sunday. In this type of conversation, you *must* deal with excuses in some way. If you don’t, an excuse blocks the conversation from moving forward to a positive conclusion.

As George Hunter points out, people fairly often get “stuck” at the closure stage, unable to make a final decision. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). We cannot control the specific time of a person’s decision to make the “Great Transition” toward a spiritual connection with God. But we can encourage closure and deadlines for closure, and thereby help to liberate people from the power of procrastination.

**C. Designing a Monthly or Every-Three-Months Membership Sunday.** Typically scheduled every three months in some small and midsize churches, some large churches conduct them monthly. Seven days in advance, the senior pastor mails a letter to not-yet-members who have attended regularly for three months, spelling out the details of this opportunity.

The letter includes clarifications such as (a) how the membership transfer happens, (b) how the profession of faith and baptism process works, and (c) membership procedures peculiar to this congregation and/or denomination. The point is to provide answers to the questions about which people are likely to have inadequate or erroneous information.

Some evening during the week prior to Membership Sunday, the pastor, a staff member, or a layperson trained in decision-calling procedures, visits each family unit that received the letter. *Do not telephone ahead. Just drop by.* (In two-adult households, if the husband or the wife is not home, chat a few minutes and promise to return later that week when both of them are home.)

After about three minutes of initial chit-chat, come to the point: *“Did you folks receive the letter telling you about our Membership Sunday?”* After they respond, say something like the following: *“I knew that you would probably be thinking of joining sometime soon. Several people will be placing their membership with us that Sunday. Many people like to do this with other people, rather than alone, so this is a good opportunity for you to come in with a group.”*

Listen carefully to any excuses or objections they raise. Respond to their “reasons for not joining” cheerfully but directly. Do not argue, but follow their excuses with, *“I understand why you feel that way, but ....”* [Add one of the responses from the lists beginning on page 6. An understanding manner and pleasant tone of voice protects you from appearing argumentative and abrasive.

Conclude by asking, *“Is there any reason why you folks couldn’t be there to transfer your membership [make your confession of faith] next Sunday?”*

If next Sunday is not possible because they are out of town, press for a definite date when they can be present.

**D. Six Universal Principles for Effective Decision Conversations.** Remember the following points anytime you talk with someone who offers an excuse for saying “no” or postponing his or her decision:

- There is a big difference between “arguing” and “meeting an excuse directly.”
- Never engage in argument. Few people are argued into the kingdom of God. But do people the courtesy of meeting their excuse *directly and honestly*.
- That nudge helps them to stop kidding themselves about their reasons for not making a decision.
- By meeting their excuses directly, you are giving them a positive reason for making a decision that they know down deep they need to and would like to make.
- If you do not meet the excuse directly, the person’s thinking *locks* at that point and they cannot move toward a positive decision.
- Many people have reported months later, after becoming active church members, how much they appreciated such directness—no one had ever cared enough about them before to run the risk of being that frank—and it helped them move off the fence into a positive highway with their lives.

**E. Twelve Guides for Effective Decision-Conversations.** The best of such conversations are a mixture of instinct and method. But knowing the following improves both.

**1. The logic of your response to an excuse is never as important as the simple unwillingness to accept the excuse as a valid reason for a negative decision.** As soon as people see that you recognize the weakness of their excuse, they are usually ready to admit that to themselves. Seldom will the person on whom you are calling continue that line of thought. He or she recognizes that the excuse has no logical legs to stand on, so his or her thought pattern moves on toward a decision.

**2. Few people use more than one excuse—or, two at the most.** This is the reason that they've been telling themselves for months or years. When you meet that first excuse in a direct manner, you are usually finished with that part of the conversation in thirty seconds. The person has exhausted his or her excuse-ammunition and moves on to consider a decision.

**3. Do not fall into the habit of trying to protect people from pressure.** People have plenty of experience at not allowing other people to pressure them. They will not allow you to do that. If they feel you are pressuring them, they will let you know it. If they send you that kind of signal, immediately say, "Now please understand that I am not pressuring you. This is a decision that we would not want you to make under pressure. However, we also want you to know that we care about you and want to invite you to become part of our family of faith."

**4. Most of the time, when we think we are trying to protect people from pressure, what we are really doing is protecting ourselves from the fear of rejection.** The person we are protecting from pressure is ourselves. We fear that if we are helpfully direct with someone, he or she will reject us and think we are not nice people.

**5. What about the tiny percent of people whose answer remains "no"?** Say something like, "I understand that you need to think about this some more. In the meantime, we are delighted to have you attending our church. If there are questions you feel that I can answer or ways you think that I might be of help, please let me know."

**6. If people make a "no" decision, they are not rejecting you as a person.** Do not be confused. You and God are different entities. It is possible for people to reject God and not reject you. Those people will treat you warmly the next time you meet them. They know that you have taken the time and trouble to come and see them.

**7. When asking people for a decision, most callers are not as perceptive as a three-year-old child.** A child knows that the word no actually means, "no, not yet." That is what "no" often means in a decision call: "No, not yet." So do not conclude that the person's decision is final. The seeds you plant may come up months later.

**8. The idea that everyone should say "yes" to our decision invitation shows considerable lack of humility on our part.** Not everyone said yes when Jesus asked for a decision. Do we expect to have more skill and better results than Jesus had? In spite of his failure to achieve 100 percent success when he asked people to "follow me," Jesus did not stop asking. With those who said yes, Jesus changed the world.

**9. Note that many of the response options use a question format.** Why? Because most people make more progress in changing their thinking when they respond to a question than when they hear statements. Do not *argue* with people, but *do* meet their blocking excuse with a firm response. The excuse they give is the one they've been telling themselves for months or years. Until someone questions it, they will not consider discarding it. Then, too, the excuse they give may not be their real reason for not joining a church or transferring their church membership. A thoughtful question often helps them to move beyond their excuse into more serious thinking.

**10. Different people feel comfortable using different types of responses to excuses.** Select *any one* of the possible responses listed under each of the thirty-eight excuses that begin on page 6. Use it in a way that seems comfortable to you. Do *not* use *all* of optional bullets listed under each excuse! That would be overkill.

**11. When using any of these responses, do so with a smile and in a non-argumentative manner.** Often, you should preface your response with, "I can understand why you would feel that way, but ...."

**12. Remember that no matter what the person decides, you always leave them closer to Christ and the Church than before the conversation.** You communicated that you care enough about them to want them in the Church.

## II. How to Answer Twelve Often-Heard Excuses

### A. “I am waiting until my husband (or wife) is ready.”

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but tell me, approximately how long have you been waiting for your husband? After they answer ask, with a smile, “Waiting hasn’t been a very successful method, has it? One member of a family waiting on the outside of the Church usually keeps the other member waiting on the outside.”
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but doesn’t each of us have to work out our relationship with God individually—apart from other people—even our wives and husbands? Waiting on a spouse could mean waiting until he or she dies. Meanwhile, we could have been growing in the love of Christ, and our children and spouse could have benefited from a stronger atmosphere of Christian love in the family.

### B. “I don’t know how long we’re going to be living here.”

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but did you enroll your children in public school when you moved here? Wouldn’t it be just as important to involve yourself in the church where you live as it is to enroll your children in a local school?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but isn’t your church membership as important as your clothes or your furniture? If so, wouldn’t it be just as important to move that?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but did you change your mailing address when you moved here? Wouldn’t it be just as important to change your church membership as to change the address on your magazines?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but none of us knows exactly how long we will be *anywhere*. Death could come any day. But doesn’t that make it even more important to obtain the highest possible value from the opportunities we have while we are here?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, and if you have definite plans for moving soon, it would be wise to wait until you are settled in your new home before you move your membership. (They will probably reply that they do not have definite plans.)
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but how long have you lived here? (The answer to that question often brings a chuckle and recognition of the obvious truth, which the person extending the church membership invitation doesn’t have to put into words.)
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but aren’t people who defer transferring their church membership placing themselves in the impossible situation of trying to be Church members without being members of a church?

### C. “I want to keep my membership in the old home church.”

- I can understand why you feel that way, and I’m glad that you enjoyed your home church. But are you *really* still a member there? Membership means more than a name in a church record book. Membership means that you attend the congregation regularly. Since you probably don’t do that, are you still a member there in any meaningful way?
- I understand why you feel that way, but all churches in the United States encourage their members to transfer their membership within six months after moving.
- I understand that feeling, but a transfer does not change your *real* Church membership, which is in the universal Church of Jesus Christ. A membership transfer changes only the record of your local church affiliation, which should match the facts.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but at least half of every church’s members are people who transfer from other congregations. If everyone left his or her membership in the old home church, that would mean the ruin of all churches in the country, including your old home church.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but in reality, you have moved your membership here already. Your membership symbolizes your relationship to God. Your *local* church relationship symbolizes whether that discipleship is active or passive.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but how long have you been away? Are you able to attend there often? You are probably on their inactive list, and that is neither helpful to that congregation nor a complement to its members.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but you can become an “associate member” of our congregation and still retain your membership back in your home church [if “associate membership” is a practice your congregation permits].
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but why not hold membership in both places? Aren’t many people members of two different civic clubs at the same time? That would allow you to do *two* positive things at once: be faithful to both the past and the present.
- I can understand why you feel that way, but since you have moved away from your home church to live here, does leaving your name on its roll book really change that fact?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but is it really a favor to the old church to clutter up its roll? It may even cost them money, because some congregations are required to pay mission dues to their denomination on a per-member assessment.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but what does leaving your name on the roll as an inactive member say to its members? Aren’t you giving evidence that your old church failed you—by teaching you to become an *inactive* rather than an *active* member of Christ’s Church?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but most parents would rather have their children be active in another church than be a refugee without a real church home.

**D. “I want to think it over some more.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, so let’s talk about that. What are the factors you feel you need to think over?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, so let me ask you a couple of questions: You do think the Church can help you to live more meaningfully, don’t you? Do you really need to think over whether you want to live a richer, fuller life?

**E. “We haven’t decided which church to join.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way. What additional information do you need in order to make a decision about our congregation?
- I can understand why you feel like that, but the only way you can really know a church is by belonging to it. If you decide to change churches, you can do that at any time. But in the meantime, wouldn’t it better for you to be active *somewhere* than nowhere?

**F. “I have just gotten out of the habit of going to church.”**

- I understand how that can happen, but if church attendance is a good habit, wouldn’t now be a good time to make a decision to get back into that habit?
- I understand how that can happen. So which would be better: *putting off* the decision to adopt a habit that you know can improve your life, or making that decision now?
- I understand how that can happen. Will there ever be a better time than right now to change that habit?

**G. “I have to work on Sundays.”**

- I understand what a challenge that presents. This has always been a problem for some Christians at some point in their lives. But couldn’t you still take an active part in church life by attending events scheduled at other times of the week?
- I understand the challenge that type of schedule presents. But wouldn’t your membership in a congregation be likely to help you to grow spiritually in ways such as having a time when you read the Bible and have prayer in your home every day?

## H. “I had too much religion forced on me when I was a kid.”

- That can create some strong feelings. How did that happen? Did you come to disapprove of the Church? Or did some fanatical group turn you against all religion? (When people try to explain their memories, they can sometimes get painful feelings off their chest and recognize some of the emptiness of their excuse.)
- That can create some strong feelings. When that happened, was it Christ that you turned against? Or was it a particular church that followed His teachings in a particular way?
- Tell me a little about those experiences. (Listen carefully and responsively.) I can understand why you would feel that way, but the congregation we are talking about is not the kind of church that created those experiences. Could you consider giving us a chance to prove that?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but some people suffer from an adolescent religious hangover all their lives. They allow a poor example of religion *applied by force* to poison all their future church relationships and possibilities for spiritual growth.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but isn't it possible to allow those early experiences to hurt you *even more* by causing you to withhold yourself from beneficial opportunities to relate to Christ and His Church all the rest of your life?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but is it really fair to judge *our church*, with which you are not well acquainted, by another church in another place with which you *are* acquainted?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but even though you didn't like something they forced on you, and especially the fact that they *forced* it, aren't you the fine person that you are today partly because of that early spiritual influence?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but I'm sure that your parents also forced you to do things like washing your hands before meals and finishing your homework. While you sometimes may have resented that, was *everything* they forced you to do a bad experience, or was it more the *way* in which they did this that bothered you so?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but isn't it time to consider beginning to undo the damage of being turned against something that is essentially good?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but was it really possible for you at that young age to accurately decide that *no church anywhere* could ever be of any value in helping you to build a meaningful life?

## I. “There are too many hypocrites in the Church.”

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but do we join a church because we want to be like the most negative examples of church members, or because we want to be like Christ?
- Yes, every church has a few hypocrites that are spiritually immature, but why should we let such people damage us by blocking us from growing spiritually?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but is it fair to yourself to allow the bad behavior of some people to keep you away from an experience that can be so beneficial in your life?
- Yes, there *are* many imperfect people in every church. Christ calls sinners into His Church, and they bring with them many unpleasant human qualities. But as long as they are trying to get better, isn't the Church a success at what it tries to accomplish?
- Yes, there are some hypocrites in the Church. On the other hand, aren't there hypocrites in every organization? So, couldn't we just as accurately say that since there are so many hypocrites *outside* the Church, I shouldn't stay *outside* of the Church?
- Yes, there are hypocrites in the Church, but isn't a hypocrite defined as a person who tries to appear to be something that he or she really is not—trying to appear to be good when he or she is really *not* good? The Church has no corner on that market. Can't you also find that type of person in any organization in town?
- Yes, there are hypocrites in the Church. Because the Church has people in it, the Church is by definition not perfect. But then, if a church was perfect, you and I would never be allowed to join it, would we?
- Yes, it may be true that there are hypocrites in the Church, but we do not know how much *worse* those people might be if they were *not* in the Church. So, isn't it impossible to tell how much the Church may actually be helping those people?
- Yes, there may be hypocrites in the Church, but it is awfully hard to judge the motives of other people. The person you think is only pretending to be good may sincerely be trying to be good, and is just weak. I know that I often fall down in my Christian life and that I'm not nearly as good a Christian as I want to be. And yet, would you call me a hypocrite?
- Do you think that *all* people in churches are hypocrites? If that were true, wouldn't we be forced to conclude that the *Church* is at fault? But that is obviously not the case. Not *everyone* in every church is a hypocrite. Most of the people who go to church find that it helps them to become better Christians. Wouldn't it be a more fair logic to judge a church by its greatest successes rather than by its greatest failures?

**J. “I work so hard during the week that I have to rest on Sunday.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but our worship service is set late in the morning for folks just like you. Even if you stay up until twelve Saturday night, you can still enjoy a good night’s sleep and get to church in ample time.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but many people tell me that attending church every Sunday refreshes them and strengthens them for their work. They get a sense of peace and rest there that they can’t find anywhere else.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but many of the hardest working people I know find that they can work more effectively if they take time to worship.

**K. “I don’t know enough about the Bible (or about the Church, or about being a Christian) to join a church.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, and I’m sure that you don’t know enough. I doubt that any of us know enough. But does a child get educated and then go to school? Or does a child go to school in order to get educated?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but the Bible teaches that the only requirement of people who join the Church is faith in Christ. Then, we spend the rest of our lives learning more of what we need to know. You do believe in Christ, don’t you?

**L. “I can be as good a Christian outside the Church as I can in it.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but could you be as good a student outside a school as inside? Perhaps you could, but aren’t you likely to be a better student by attending school?
- For military families: Do you think that you could be as good a soldier outside the army as in it? You might, but aren’t you likely to be a better soldier in the army than outside of it?
- Is anyone so good that he or she does not need all the help that’s available to get better [grow spiritually]?
- That might theoretically be true, but the New Testament does not report any examples of people following Christ *alone*, outside of His Church.
- I understand how you could feel that way, but doesn’t that lead to a couple of practical questions? Firstly, are you as good [spiritually strong] as you’d like to be? And secondly, isn’t it likely that you would become an even better person with the Church’s help?

### **III. How to Answer another Twenty-six Occasionally-Heard Excuses**

Sometimes people use two excuses—from different slices of the pie. But most people have told themselves one particular excuse over and over for years. So they immediately voice that mental recording when they think about, or when someone asks them to consider, a decision for Christ or joining a congregation.

#### **A. Procrastination, False Humility, and Anti-Social Excuses**

##### **1. “I’ll do it sometime, but not now.”**

- I’m glad to hear that you have decided that sometime you are going to unite with our Church [or, become a Christian]. That is the best step anyone can decide to take to spiritually enrich his or her life. But if you believe that uniting with the Church [or becoming a Christian] is the right thing to do, why wouldn’t now be a better time to do that than later?

##### **2. “I’m just too busy to go to church.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way. At times, I feel the same way. But isn’t it true that the busier people are, the more they need God’s help? Worship services are full of people who are so busy that without that influence they could not keep going.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but don’t you think attending worship services might help you to keep your priorities more sharply focused, use your time more efficiently, and actually get *more* done rather than less?

##### **3. “I can get good sermons on TV and the radio.”**

- I’m sure you can, but most people who stop attending church also stop listening to sermons elsewhere, too. I know that I’m that way. When I stop attending worship, my prayer life falls off, my commitment to help with Christ’s work begins to slack off, and my financial giving slips. I wonder if that same thing could happen in your life.
- That may be true, but the big danger of that habit is “comfortable couch Christianity.” The person who only listens to sermons can become very indrawn, beginning to think more of serving self and the immediate family than of serving God and others. For many people, the electronic church becomes an “electronic Christian relaxer” when they don’t participate in a congregation

##### **4. “I can’t understand the Bible.”**

- No one can totally understand the entire Bible, but people who are as intelligent as a twelve-year-old child can understand what they need to understand: God loves us and wants a spiritual relationship with each of us. Isn’t that all we really *must* understand about the Bible?

## **5. “I am not good enough to join the Church.”**

- I can understand why you feel that way, and I’m sure that you probably aren’t. Neither am I. Nor do I know of anyone who is. But we do not earn salvation and a relationship with God by our good lives; God gives it to us as a free gift, when we ask for it.
- I can understand why you feel that way, but do you go to a hospital because you are perfectly healthy? Or do you go to a hospital in order to get well?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but the Church is a spiritual hospital for sinners, not a society of people who are perfect. Since you feel that you are imperfect, you are just the type of person God wants in His Church.
- With people who have really obvious sin and guilt in their lives (rather than the false guilt that is so common), some callers like to say, “You are honest with yourself, and you feel that you ought to give up what you are doing. That is the first big step. You feel that you cannot be happy when you are leading a divided life. Another great day will come when you decide to take the second step and do what you feel God is calling you to do.” Under other circumstances, some callers prefer to say, “People cannot follow the teachings of Christ by sheer willpower; only after they accept Christ as their Savior can they receive the spiritual power that helps them to overcome temptations and change their bad habits. God will give you the power to do what you feel He is calling you to do.”
- If the objection is a minor matter on which consciences may differ, some callers say, “Yes, you may hear that criticized in some churches. The Church is a teacher, and teachers have to take positions. But if you believe you can do that with no disloyalty to Christ, and that it does not hurt you or anyone else, then it will not keep you from being a member of the our congregation. The Church permits anything that Christ permits. We believe that kind of decision must be made individually, by each person. We do not demand exact conformity of belief by every member. We only demand sincerity and faithfulness to what you personally feel Christ calls you to do.”

## **6. “I do things that the Church does not approve of.”**

- If what you have in mind stands between you and God, wouldn’t you probably want to give it up, whether you become a church member or not? But if what you are thinking of is just a matter of personal opinion among people, then you’ll find that our congregation expects you to live by your own conscience rather than by what someone in the church thinks.

**7. “I cannot live a Christian life because of the way I have to make my living.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but if that is really true, then as well as considering a decision to let Christ into your life, might you want to consider changing jobs, too? On the other hand, might God be calling you to become a positive influence in the environment in which you work?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but there are times when it is not necessary or wise to change jobs. Yes, a non-Christian environment tends to drag people down, spiritually. But couldn't you offset its influence by keeping active in a church, plus reading the Bible and praying daily?

**8. “Church is a hassle, and I don't want to be hassled.”**

- Yes, church is a hassle at times. But aren't all the good things in this world a hassle at times—marriage, children, work? But that doesn't mean that they have no value.
- Yes, it is a hassle at times. But so is everything else in life. And the hassles of church can help to ease the other hassles of life and help us to deal with them more effectively.

**9. “Nobody cares whether I attend church or not. I'm just another face in the crowd.”**

- I care whether you come.
- At least one person cares that you come, and that person is me.
- The breakdown of relationships can be a real problem, but I don't think you will find that to be true in our congregation. We are a caring people and would like you to become part of that caring group.

## **B. Anti-Congregation, -Church, -Pastor, and -Parishioner Excuses**

### **1. “I’m already a Christian, and I don’t wish to join a denomination.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, but in joining a congregation you are *not* saying that you agree with everything you hear about its denomination. Local churches are primarily doors into the timeless and worldwide Church of Jesus Christ that helps people grow spiritually and live a meaningful life.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but separate Christian groups result more from geographical, cultural, and language differences than from anything else. And different convictions about how to operate a church sometimes make separate organizations more practical. But many denominations now cooperate with each other in a wide variety of ministries that help hurting people. Many denominations freely exchange members, ministers, and literature among themselves. All the denominations are moving closer to one another every year.
- I understand your concern, but we are *not* asking you to consider joining a particular denomination. We are inviting you to connect with a congregation that you might think of as one of the retail outlets of the universal Church of Jesus Christ. Our congregation’s ministries are dedicated to helping people to grow spiritually in their relationship with God and to more effectively care for needy and hurting people. How can that be a bad idea?

### **2. “The Church has become too liberal [or too far behind the times].”**

- I can certainly understand your concern about that. I’m guessing that what you mean is that some denominational and national agencies of the Church have views that you consider wrong. But wouldn’t it be foolish to miss all the joys and spiritual growth opportunities of church participation because of discontent with the opinions of remote denominational officials?
- I can understand that concern, so if you feel strongly about that, why not give your time and designate your money *only* to the ministries that you believe are important and effective? With our congregation’s freedom of thought, that is permissible.

**3. “All the Church talks about is money, and I can’t afford to give.”**

- I understand your concern. All churches must have money in order to operate their ministries, just like every home requires money to function. But I can assure you that our church talks more about Christ than about money.
- I understand your concern. But I think you’ll find—as I and so many others have found—that when Christ calls you into the family of God, He enables you by the power of His Grace to contribute financially to help support its ministries. Most Christians learn that financial resources with God in their life are greater than financial resources *without* God in their life.
- I understand your concern, but the Church is different from most societies and clubs. Our congregation has no entrance fee and no set dues. It follows the teachings of the Bible and asks people to give what they feel God calling them to give, proportionate to their ability to give.

**4. “I don’t like some of the people who attend your church.”**

- I understand your feelings. To tell the truth, there are a few people there who I find it difficult to like, too, just as you find in any other group such as a lodge or a club. But do you know *everyone* in our congregation and feel that way about *every* member?
- I understand your feelings, but are you being fair to yourself if you allow the dislike for particular people to keep you away from a good organization such as the Church, which can help to strengthen your spiritual life so much?

**5. “Your church seems cold and unfriendly.”**

- I’m sorry that you got a bad impression of our church. But I don’t think that is typical of our members. Visitors often speak of how warm and friendly they find our church. I suppose it may depend partly on the people you happen to run into that day.
- I’m sorry you had an experience that gave you that impression. Will you give us another chance? Could you attend next Sunday and let me introduce you to some people that I feel will give you quite a different impression?

## 6. “I don’t like the preacher.”

- I understand your feelings, but do you join a church because of what you think of the preacher, or because of what you think of Christ?
- I understand your feelings, but ministers come and go in our congregation; each one does some things extremely well and does *not* do other things so well. But Christ and His teachings and the ministries of His Church go on—despite what pastor we have at the moment. It is Christ that we are primarily inviting you to relate to, not the pastor.
- I understand your feelings, but I’m sure that you would agree that it is a mistake to join a church just because of a particular minister. Using that same logic, wouldn’t it be just as much of a mistake to stay out of a church because of a particular minister?
- I understand your feelings. A minister, like all human beings, has failings. But don’t you think that people receive great spiritual benefits of following Christ and involvement in His Church, regardless of who the pastor happens to be?
- I understand your feelings, but I think that when you come to know her/him better, you will come to appreciate her/him more. (The caller may then wish to give some examples of the minister’s good traits and the good things that he or she has done, for which many people have admiration.)

## C. Negative Personal History and Experiences Excuses

### 1. “I don’t believe in God anymore, after what has happened to me.”

- Do you mind telling me a little about that? (Ask questions and listen carefully to learn the cause of their pain.) Tell them, “We do not know why bad things happen to good people—but we do know from what Jesus told us, that God loves each one of us and wants to keep us from pain and evil.”
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but some of the deepest believers have been the greatest sufferers, and depending on God can be a great help in our suffering.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but no one, not even the best Christian, is exempt from the power of evil and pain. When bad things happen to us, instead of asking “Why me?” it would be just as logical to ask, “Why not me? Am I so special that I am exempt from the bad things that happen to everyone else?” (This response can be helpful in dealing with the self-pity to which many such persons have succumbed.)

### 2. “After what happened in my last church, I decided I would never join a church again.”

- I can understand why you would feel that way. Could you tell me a little about that experience? (Describing that painful time to a sympathetic, listening, caring person can help people get it off their chest and make it seem less grave.)
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but one of the virtues that Christ teaches is forgiveness. It sounds like your grievance is still interfering with your spiritual life. Through a new church relationship, God gives many people the power to forgive those wrongs and move beyond them in their emotional and spiritual lives.
- Something like that can hurt deeply. But weren’t you hurt because you were expecting much more from that church, and were disappointed? The church we are asking you to consider joining is not the one that hurt you; it is one that wants to help you.
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but should you let one bad experience with a congregation rob you, for your whole lifetime, of many opportunities for spiritual growth and meaningful chances to serve God and help other people?
- I can understand why you would feel that way, but let me ask you this: Do you have a grudge against God because of that bad experience with a church? If so, aren’t you being unfair to yourself by letting that bad experience with people in one church keep you away from all future *good* experiences with other churches?

**3. “We were so busy at our last church that we want to take a rest.”**

- I compliment you on having been such active church members. But as you have so painfully learned, it is possible to so overextend yourself in time commitments that you hurt yourself both physically and spiritually. Our church would certainly encourage you to avoid doing that here. Your physical and spiritual health is more important than the number of church jobs you undertake.
- I can understand why you would feel that way. Every member feels God calling him or her to assume some responsibility in the church, but taking on too many jobs at once is ultimately destructive to you, to others in the church, and to the overall congregation’s health. Our philosophy is “one job for one person, well done.”

## **D. Faith and Theological Issues Excuses**

### **1. “I don’t believe in God.”**

- Tell me what causes you not to believe in God?
- Does this mean that Jesus was either completely wrong or a liar in what he taught us about God?
- Lower forms of life are not always aware of higher forms of life. The amoeba is not aware of the ant. The ant is not fully aware of the human being. Should we be surprised to learn that human beings are not fully aware of the nature of God? But that doesn’t prove that God does not exist, does it?
- I can’t prove to you that God exists. No one can do that. But you can’t prove that there isn’t a God, either. Faith is always a personal choice. The greater evidence, however, seems to be on the side of believing that something lies behind our complex universe. As Thomas Aquinas said, “Nothing is its own cause. For to do so, it would have to precede itself, which is impossible.”

### **2. “I don’t believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.**

- Would you mind sharing with me what you *do* believe about Christ? Do you believe He existed? Or do you believe He was a great teacher like Mohammed or Confucius?
- Eighty percent of Americans believe that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God. What do you feel has caused you to be in the 20 percent who do *not* believe this?
- We cannot prove that Christ was God or that He rose from the dead. But if He didn’t, how do you explain the fact that His disciples were willing to give their lives for this belief? It is possible for one person to be crazy, but is it reasonable to believe that eleven friends were crazy at the same time? When you think about it that way, isn’t it more unreasonable to think that Jesus wasn’t the Son of God than to think that he was?

### **3. “There are some things in the Bible that I don’t believe.”**

- A good many people, if they were honest, would say that there are some things in the Bible that they have trouble believing. But isn’t the big issue whether we believe there is a God who loves us and calls us to relate to Him? Do you have trouble believing that?
- I feel the same way about some things in the Bible, but I also find myself agreeing with Mark Twain’s statement that he wasn’t so much bothered by the things in the Bible that he couldn’t understand as the ones he could understand.
- What we believe about matters reported in the Bible is not the major issue. What we believe about Christ is, however, a major matter. Can you tell me something of what you believe about Christ?

**4. “I can’t believe everything that the Church teaches.”**

- I can understand why you would feel that way, and if you mean everything that the *various* churches have taught, I can’t either. What particular teaching is giving you trouble?
- If the person brings up a knotty theological or biblical question, or a denominational idiosyncrasy, you will find it helpful to say, “Christians need to look for more light on those questions, but the first thing we have to decide is what we think of *Christ*, rather than what we think of some congregation’s thinking *about Christ*. Don’t you agree?”

**5. “I have too many doubts.”**

- What doubts do you mean? (Listen carefully and responsively.)
- No one would join *any* church if they had to wait until they made up their minds about every doctrine churches teach. Sorting through those is a lifetime occupation for every Christian.
- You say that you have doubts, and everyone has a few of those. But tell me, on the positive side, what do you believe about Christ and the Church?

**6. “I don’t want to force my children to attend a particular church. I want them to make their own choice about religion.”**

- Do your children make their own choice about other major values, such as brushing their teeth, going to the doctor, or going to school?
- Parents who don’t attend church are actually taking away their children’s freedom of choice, because they are influencing them not to go to any kind of church.
- Children *need* the influence of parents. Studies by the Gallup Poll organization indicate that most people who become active Christians were influenced to do so by their parents.

**7. “We have a denominationally divided home.”**

- I can certainly understand your concern about that, but isn’t it going to be very important for your children and your whole family that you make a decision one way or another? Research indicates that children feel emotionally stressed when their parents disagree about something as important as their religious faith.
- I can certainly understand your concern about that, but since many couples with differing backgrounds have found our church to be a place where they can unite their spiritual lives, this would be a good opportunity for you folks to solve that dilemma.

**8. “People can prove almost anything by quoting the Bible, so I don’t see the value of following its advice about belonging to a church.”**

- Yes, if people quote the words of certain Bible verses, then string them together in certain sequences, amazing interpretations can result. For example, take these three verses: “Judas went out and hanged himself.” “Go thou and do likewise.” “What thou doest, do quickly.” Those are all exact quotations from the Bible. But if you keep each verse in its setting and try to understand what God is saying through those words, can you really prove anything you want from the Bible? Probably not!
- That might be true if you pick out one or two verses and say, “This is what Christianity is all about.” But don’t the people who seriously study *all* of the Bible begin to see the big picture of God’s loving you and me so much that He sent His Son to show us how to find a meaningful life in the here and the hereafter? Don’t people who genuinely study the Bible get much more out of it than the microscopic view of one single verse?