

From the Pastor's Desk (1989 - 1993)

Church membership

What do we understand by a church membership certificate? Is it a document on file in the church's archives? Can you ask for a return of your church membership in the same manner as you would ask the bank to return papers you had deposited for safe keeping? A church does not have a membership certificate file. That's why it cannot be returned. Each local church is independent. When someone moves to another locality he/she is obliged to join the local congregation of his/her new place of residence. The Belgic Confession states this clearly: "We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition. But all people are obliged to join and unite with it, keeping the unity of the church..." (Art.28). So when members move they are entitled to a "certificate, issued by the consistory, concerning their doctrine and life. When such certificates of membership are requested, they shall ordinarily be mailed to the church of their new residence" (Church Order, Art.66a.). Literally the Dutch originally read: "An attestation or testimony shall be given along with those who remove from the congregation." The obligation to join the new congregation rests with the church member who has moved. A certificate cannot be sent without the member's approval. Church membership is a solemn obligation, but also a matter of voluntary commitment. A member who moves from A to B asks from his consistory a membership transfer. This document is a testimony to his confession and Christian walk. Since the church he joins is another Reformed Church, the "attestation" is accepted; and the believer is welcomed into the fellowship and has his name added to the membership role. But once this has happened, the membership certificate has no longer any value. Why not? Because it is a testimony of consistory A regarding Mr. B and a request to consistory C to admit this member to the fellowship of the church. And the certificate contains a request of consistory A to consistory B to look after the brother. And so even a membership certificate request involves an understanding of the privileges and obligations of belonging to a local body of believers, which has voluntarily joined a larger fellowship of churches which share their same confessional stance.

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