

“Membership: Every Body in The Body”

By Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Schooley



The other night, Netflix’s algorithm got it right. I was scrolling for something to watch after Bri went to bed when whatever soul-hacking AI Netflix uses to analyze me and my tastes fed me up a nice, short documentary titled *Join Or Die* (2023). Feeling rather life-inclined, I was intrigued to know what I needed to do in order to stave off death. The answer? Pay attention to Robert Putnam’s contemporary classic *Bowling Alone* (2000). The documentary was largely a favorable retrospective on the circumstances that led to Putnam’s 1995 essay that would later become his wildly popular book in 2000.

If you’re not familiar with this work, Wikipedia’s introductory paragraph provides a nice synopsis: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* is a 2000 nonfiction book by Robert D. Putnam. It was developed from his 1995 essay entitled "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital". Putnam surveys the decline of social capital in the United States since 1950. He has described the reduction in all the forms of in-person social intercourse upon which Americans used to found, educate, and enrich the fabric of their social lives. He argues that this undermines the active civic engagement which a strong democracy requires from its citizens.

Even if it’s been more than a decade since you last thought of *Bowling Alone*, my gut tells me that you already have a passing familiarity with it, since this work took America by storm in the year or so leading up to September 11, 2001 (at which point, all previous topics of conversation seemed to cease).

I found Netflix’s algorithm’s timing suspicious because in the weeks leading up to my watching this film, there had been conversations about a new membership class for the church. By my best estimate, there may be up to 17 total people who would be good candidates for membership in the church. (For some perspective, that would be a HUGE membership class for our church; it would represent a more than 10-percent growth in membership in a single day!).

But there’s always challenges to membership in Presbyterian churches because unlike our Catholic siblings, our theology does not proclaim that one’s eternal salvation directly correlates to one’s earthly membership in the church. The best representation of this difference is in the fact that non-members can receive the eucharist. I don’t advise trying that at a Catholic church. Additionally, we happily accept non-members into the full tapestry of our life together. Non-members can do everything a member can do with one exception: serve on one of the councils of the church (read: Session, Deacons, Trustees).

In addition to this theological flexibility around membership, we also have to pay attention to the moment in time in which we live. We are still living in the “bowling alone” world that Putnam described so well a quarter-century ago. (Quick aside: Putnam named his book *Bowling Alone* after discovering that bowling alleys were thriving with customers, but that bowling leagues had diminished considerably since their peak in the years immediately following World War Two. Putnam realized for those two things to be true, people had to still be bowling, but... bowling alone).

And so, a conversation about church membership sits at the intersection of two phenomena: a theology that emphasizes one’s participation – but not necessarily membership in – a congregation *and* a society in which “joining” isn’t really in vogue. My first decade in ordained church leadership has largely been lived at this intersection. Every church I’ve served (albeit to differing degrees of severity) has emphasized the need to grow membership. Some churches (not ours!) find their ego and identity in church growth so that every member who dies and isn’t replaced by a new member is just a sign that the church is “dying.” Other churches desire membership because they think it is good for both the person joining and the people who are joined. For my part, I’ve tried different approaches to honestly addressing the topic in its current context, but even my best efforts – efforts that are maybe too googly-eyed for me to authentically pull off when I describe joining the church as a “love letter” wherein a person tells the congregation, “I love you” and the congregation responds with “we love you too” – even my best efforts have felt wanting. Simply put, my challenge isn’t just to overcome spiritual nerves that folks might rightly have about joining a church, but to also confront the anti-joining status quo that is part of the spirit of the age in which we live.

But this is where Putnam is so helpful because he *believes* in joining. He believes in it deeply. His academic career is over (he turned 84 years old in January), but it is clear that even a life lived dedicated to this topic did not complete his efforts to plumb the depth of all of joining’s power and potential. Indeed, many of our big problems today can trace at least part of their origin back to this anti-joining impulse. We are all too well aware of political partisanship – which would seem to imply more people joining two opposing parties – but the reality is that “independents” are the largest “party” in American politics. According to a Gallup poll from January 2024, registered independents accounted for 40% of all registered voters, while both the Republican and Democratic parties only had 27% of registered membership each. (The remaining 6% went to small, third parties). Of course, one might contend that registration as an “independent” was bound to increase as different states began to allow that designation, but the reality is that states only began to allow that designation after a critical mass of people basically said, “I don’t want to join a party; make me an independent,” which only substantiates Putnam’s point. The result of this burgeoning “independent” affiliation is that political parties chase this essential voting bloc, even at the expense of their well-reasoned party platforms. (Indeed, in the past presidential election cycle, the Republican party did not even create an official platform, in part because platforms are too binding – that is, too much like membership – and is thus an electoral liability).

But even beyond the world of politics, this anti-joining impulse has far-reaching social implications. Fewer people participate in Parent-Teacher Associations now than ever before. Our present struggles to pass levies to fund our schools is probably not a surprise once we realize this. (And not just Bowling Green, but Perrysburg too... as well as hundreds of school districts throughout the state!). Organizations like the PTA – or Kiwanis or Rotary or bowling leagues or dinner clubs or bridge clubs or all the rest – mean that we are not

being put into conversation with our neighbors. It means we live in the echo chamber of our own heads (and as anyone with anxiety and/or depression can tell you, “inside my own head” can be one of the worst residencies one can keep!). And what makes matters even worse is that America’s population has more than doubled between 1950 and 2024 (from 154 million to 341.8 million in nearly 75 years). In theory, we should need *double* the number of bowling leagues!

And while Putnam makes a good case for rekindling a society of joining, our theology makes an even stronger case. Proverbs (27:17) reminds us that “as iron sharpens iron, so does one person sharpen another.” This piece of ancient wisdom reminds us that we are only made better in who we’re created to be as we join our lives alongside others’ lives. But the strongest endorsement for joining the church (in particular) comes from the Apostle Paul who wrote in First Corinthians 12, “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Indeed, the entire 12th chapter is dedicated to extolling the virtues of being members of the Body of Christ. And that word – “member” – is significant in this body metaphor as “member” derives from the Latin “membrum,” which literally means “limb.” We are meant to explore this metaphor to its very depths. We are meant to visualize a pile of limbs as the horror movie/stuff of nightmares it is, while also seeing that a bunch of assembled limbs can become a body capable of embracing and loving.

Ours is a world desperately in need of a hug. We live in a society – even a community – where too many people have become too accustomed to only seeing piles of limbs wherever their eyes survey. Plagued by such a perpetual horror show, it is no wonder people can act so horrifically.

I believe one of the primary missions of the Church today is to provide an alternative; it is to offer hugs where typically only horrors attend. I believe it is our duty to our neighbors – as an extension of Christ’s command to love our neighbors – to demonstrate how they can bring their member/limb to become part of a body bigger than them.

Of course, in the cosmic sense, you are already a member of the Body of Christ by dint of your baptism, your worship of God, and your receiving the eucharist (which, significantly, is also called “the body of Christ”). But you can’t necessarily blame your neighbor if they fail to see the cosmic truth in their midst. It is reasonable that they might need to see membership in more immediate, earthly ways.

And so, if you are someone who receives a phone call or email from me or any other member in the Membership Committee, I hope you’ll take the time to honestly consider joining the church. I believe that there are indescribable personal benefits to this decision, but there are also pro-social consequences to joining as well. And if you are already a member, I hope this article and a focus on membership will rekindle in you a love for the membership you already share.

While there is no reason to believe that a failure to join makes a person less Christian (whatever that might mean anyway?) or even less connected (we have good examples of non-members who are plenty connected!), I’m inspired by Putnam and the scriptures alike to continue to encourage membership. Not just for ourselves individually, not even for the church as a community, but because we live in a world full of lonely limbs looking for a place where they can rest their tired, fearful bones. Let us, then, model for them what it looks like to bring their “member” into a body bigger than themselves. Amen.

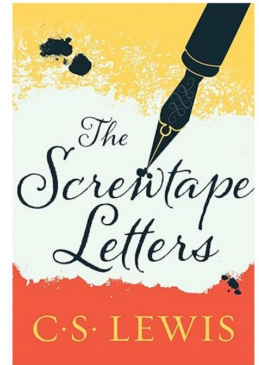
MARCH FYMS PAGE

Family and Youth Ministry Monthly Updates

WE MEET *A Wednesday time of community and learning*

We Meet will be starting up in March! The first meeting will be March 12th for a "normal" WeMeet. However, this semester we are going to try a book study on the book "The Screwtape Letters" by C.S. Lewis.

We will be doing the study March 19, 26, and April 2, 9. If you are interested in the study please see Amanda. We can get a copy to borrow from the Library for you! You are of course welcome to buy your own copy if wanted.



Dinner is at 5:30 and lessons begin at 6:15. Remember, We Meet is a time to gather and commune as you are we meet from 5:30 - 7:00pm but feel free to come and go when you can. You are welcome here!

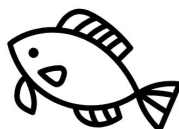
"C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* has entertained and enlightened readers the world over with its sly and ironic portrayal of human life and foibles from the unique vantage point of Screwtape, a highly placed assistant to "Our Father Below." At once wildly comic, deadly serious, and strikingly original, C.S. Lewis gives us the correspondence of the wordly-wise devil to his nephew Wormwood, a novice demon in charge of securing the damnation of an ordinary young man. *The Screwtape Letters* is the most engaging account of temptation—and triumph over it—ever written."



The Chili Cook off for raising funds for our youth to go to Camp and Triennium this year will be March 16th. If you would like to test out your best chili or soup sign-up with Amanda! Awards and a traveling trophy will be awarded to the best chilis/soups. (There will be prizes!) OR bring an empty stomach ready for chili on the 16th! Corn bread and crackers will be provided.

LENTEN STUDY *40 Days of Reflection*

Our daily lenten study will begin March 5th. There will be a daily verse and reflection posted on our Facebook page as well as an ask to put so many coins in your One Great Hour of Sharing boxes based on each reflection. Boxes and study calendars can be picked up at the church starting March 2nd. If you do not have access to facebook but still would like the daily reflections. Ask Amanda to be put on the daily e-mail list.



PAIRS AND SPARES

Our Young Adults group (ages 21-40ish) will be meet March 22nd at 6:30pm at Brewing Green/Jack and Do's Pizza for dinner and conversation. Join us for a fun time of conversation and friendship.

"For dust you are and to dust you shall return."



ASH WEDNESDAY MEAL AND SERVICE

Ash Wednesday is March 5th. Join us in the fellowship hall for a very simple meal of soup and bread at 6:00pm before the 7:00pm Ash Wednesday service.

Staff at First Presbyterian

Pastor
Rev. Dr. Jeff Schooley
fpcbgjeff@gmail.com
330/931-9165

Family & Youth Ministries
Specialist (FYMS)
Amanda Ark
akark@bgsu.edu
937/ 844-6787

Director of Music Ministry
Heather McEwen Goldman
goldman.heather@gmail.com
646/326-4058

Assistant Music Director
Kourtney Hill
kourtneysynu@gmail.com

Office Administrator
Tammy Schnitker
firstpresbyterianbg@gmail.com
419/352-5176

Treasurer, Gale Swanka
gswanka@bgsu.edu
419/575-1478

Joyce Kepke, Financial Secretary
kepkejm@dacor.net
419-270-2958

Sextons Fernando Hernandez &
Monica Garcia

Nursery Worker
Araya Musselman

Phone: 419/352-5176

E-mail:
firstpresbyterianbg@gmail.com

Website: firstpresbyterianbg.org

**The office is closed daily for
lunch 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.**



Helping Hands



toothpaste, toothbrushes, baby diapers (sizes 2-6), and wet wipes. If you want to contribute but don't have time to shop, a monetary donation can be made. We will do the shopping.

Donations can be placed in the box located in the church lobby for collection on March 9th and taken to First Christian Church for distribution on March 14th.

If you would like to help with distribution of food, cleaning and hygiene products, join us on March 14th from 4:00 to 6:00 pm at First Christian Church, on the corner of Poe and Haskins Roads.

We are making a difference in people's lives. Thank you for supporting this community project.



Terri McNamara, Elynn Stout, Scotty Huntington,
Libby Dachik, Kathy Sweeney, Lee Liebetreu,
Dave Horger

The **Hospitality and Membership Committee** is still looking for people to help with set up/clean up and provide food for coffee hour after our church services.

This is an easy way to get involved and committee members will help you get started. The sign up sheet is in the fellowship hall.



First Friday will be March 7 at 6pm at Cocina de Carlos, 205 Farnsworth Rd in Waterville. We do not have to go upstairs!! RSVP to Nettie Rose, nettierose@aol.com or 419/262-7889.



Easter Lilies

Presbyterian Women are pleased to offer 13 white Easter Lilies for sale to decorate the church sanctuary for Easter and to commemorate and honor the memory of loved ones. The price is \$14.00 per plant. **Checks should be made payable to Presbyterian Women with the word "lily" on the memo line.** Money may be placed in the church offering plate or mailed to

the Church office. **The deadline to request and turn in money is Thursday, April 3, or until the lilies are sold out.** Families who purchase flowers may pick them up after the Easter Service on April 20.

Please fill out your Easter Lily order with the following information:

Name _____

Phone number _____

In Memory or Honor of _____

Number of plants ordered _____



Two members (Nettie Rose & Shirley Brannan) of our church choir sing in the Perrysburg Chorale and have upcoming concerts you may be interested in attending. **On March 8th at 7 pm** they will be at **First Presbyterian Church in Maumee** and on **March 9th at 3 pm** they will perform at **All Saints Church in Rossford**. Both concerts are free and open to the public.

Help Your Church Earn Extra Cash . . . Kroger Community Rewards.

Dear First Presbyterian Church—BG(AD555),

The Kroger Co. Family of Stores is committed to bringing hope and help to the local neighborhoods we call home. We appreciate your participation in our Community Rewards program to help accomplish that mission. Our church recently received a check for \$127.81 (11/24-1/25), 29 households have designated that their rewards are given to the church and you can too!



New members can enroll by searching for either the new number or the name of your organization.

- Go to www.kroger.com, sign in, and click on the "community" tab.
- Scroll down to Kroger Community Rewards.
- Click on View Your Rewards Details.
- Then scroll down to Community Rewards. It will show if you are enrolled to benefit First Presbyterian Church. **Remember you have to reenroll every year so now is the time!**
- **If you are not enrolled, click edit and select First Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green (Organization Number: AD555)**

You may need to create an account, if you have not done so already. That's pretty simple - just follow the directions on kroger.com.

March 2025

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
ESL=La Conexion English as a 2nd	YG=Youth Group	Med. Grp.=Meditation	HYT=Horizon Youth Theatre	OEA=Overeaters Anonymous	TL= Trumpet Lessons	SC=Sort Clothes DS= Deacons
						1 8:30-12 PEO Grp in FH
2 10 Worship & Communion 4 Girl Scouts 7 MRG-GL	3 Closed	4 1 Book Group in Library 2 Green Team mtg in Gr. Lounge 5:30 ESL 8 AA in FH	5 9 Sorting Clothes 6 Ash Wednesday Meal 7 Worship Service	6 9:30 Deacons' Shop is open 9:30 Staff mtg. 5:30 ESL 6 Bell rehearsal 7 Choir rehearsal 7 MR in FH	7 1st Friday at Cocina de Carlos (Waterville)	8 10-1 WC Mobile Health Clinic in the church parking lot
9 10 Worship 11:30 Mission Committee 4 Girl Scouts 7 MRG-GL	10 Closed	11 1 Book Group in Library 5:30 ESL 5:30 Session 7 W2W Circle in CYL 8 AA in FH	12 9 Sorting Clothes 4:30 Trustees Mtg 5:30 We Meet	13 9:30 Deacons' Shop is open 9:30 Staff mtg. 5:30 ESL 6 Bell rehearsal 7 Choir rehearsal 7 MR in FH	14 4:30 Helping Hands at 1st Christian Church	15
16 10 Worship 11:30 Chili Cook- off 11:30 Deacons' 4 Girl Scouts 7 MRG-GL	17 Closed 4:30 Kindred Spirits Circle in Library	18 1 Book Group in Library 5:30 ESL 8 AA in FH	19 9 Sorting Clothes 5:30 We Meet 6:15 Book Study	20 9:30 Deacons' Shop is open 5:00 Worship mtg 5:30 ESL 6 Bell rehearsal 7 Choir rehearsal 7 MR in FH	21	22 6:30 Pairs & Spares Group at Brewing Green/ Dack/Do's Pizza
23 10 Worship 11 Member Inquiry Luncheon 4 Girl Scouts 7 MRG-GL	24 Closed	25 April Newsletter DdIn 1 Book Group in Library 5:30 ESL 7 Christian Nurture & Membership Mtg. 8 AA in FH	26 9 Sorting Clothes 5:30 We Meet 6:15 Book Study	27 9:30 Deacons' Shop is open 9:30 Staff mtg. 5:30 ESL 6 Bell rehearsal 7 Choir rehearsal 7 MR in FH	28	29
30 10 Worship 4 Girl Scouts-GL 7 MRG-GL	31 Closed					



March 2025

March 01 Skip Oman, Makellen Weisert
March 03 Betty Long
March 04 Doug Nusser, O'Leo Loki
March 05 Marcia Young
March 08 Ryan Rife
March 10 Peggy Brigham
March 13 Mickey Cochrane
March 19 Doretta Fenton-Schmidt
March 23 Anne Clark, Linda Evans
March 24 Dick Martin
March 25 Allen Holder
March 29 Karla Geyman, Adriane Weisert
March 30 Joan McEwen, Jackson LaPointe
(if your birthday doesn't appear here, please contact the office)

2025 Officers of the Church

SESSION

Class of 2025: Jen Coddling, O'Leo Loki,
Donna Nelson-Beene
Class of 2026: Dar Bevelhymmer, Karla Geyman,
Chris Williams
Class of 2027: Anne Moser, Christine Guenther, Lisa Lawson
Moderator: Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Schooley: Clerk: Anne Moser

DEACONS

Class of 2025: Terri McNamara, Dave Horger
Class of 2026: Kathy Sweeney, Lee Liebetreu
Class of 2027: Libby Dachik, Scotty Huntington, Ellyn Stout
Chair: Terri McNamara Secretary: Libby Dachik

TRUSTEES

Class of 2025: Sue Clark, Chet Marcin
Class of 2026: Lowell Nees, Dana Nemeth
Class of 2027: Rosemary Apple
Co-Chairs: Sue Clark & Dana Nemeth
Secretary:

First Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
126 South Church Street
Bowling Green OH 43402
phone: 419/352-5176
email: firstpresbyterianbg@gmail.com
web: www.firstpresbyterianbg.org

We are on Facebook.

