

## **The Pastor of Paganville**

You're the pastor of a small church in a place we'll call "Paganville." Paganville is a location where church growth has been notoriously difficult. (A more honest term might be "non-existent.")

Once upon a time, your congregation had a high-water mark of around 90, but it has dwindled to a faithful 30 on a good day. Due to the economy of your little town most of the younger generations have moved on to greener pastures. The few that remain are past the age of having kids so the future for this congregation doesn't look all that bright unless there's some change in the near future.

But joy of joys! In the last several weeks four different people have approached you with the expressed desire of joining the church. But, each of them comes with various entanglements...

**Lisa M.** is a 41-year old, divorced mother of four kids. She seems to be a very sweet lady and sincere as the day is long (although you wish she'd attend more often.) You've been in her home, studied with her and gone over the points of doctrine that your congregation holds. She says she understands them and is ready to take the step into membership. The only problem is that a few weeks ago you were driving by her home and you saw her watering the flowers at dusk... and it was obvious that she was smoking and one of the doctrines of your church is that members don't smoke.

**Aaron L.** is edging on 50. He actually has some background in your church family as his aunt was a long-term member and she used to bring him to worship events when he was a young child. You look at his lifestyle and really can't see anything blatant (unlike with Lisa) where there appears to be an obvious disconnect for the expectations of membership. The only problem is that when you seek to engage him in any spiritual discussion he always immediately deflects the conversations to his theories of government conspiracy and the "man of sin" and the anti-Christ and how they are out to get him because he knows too much about them. Oh, he says he wants membership but he's never attended church one time in all the time you've been in Paganville.

**Len R.** is in his mid-40's. His dad actually taught at one of your denomination's colleges and Len attended several of them. He never stayed at one because he wasn't allowed to. His life and actions always brought the administration to the point where they had to remove him for he so often flaunted his disdain for the church and its standards. After college his life fell apart and he did several stints in prison for various lesser felonies. He's actually been baptized and rebaptized several times. He says he doesn't even remember how many. He's into a new marriage now and it has lasted for four years. That's more than twice the length of his other three. He doesn't actually come to church very often but it appears that NA and AA have helped him mostly remain sober for a while. When you ask him why he wants to take this step he admits that it would mean a lot to his mother.

**Becky K.** is a 29-year old neighbor to the church. She actually mostly goes to another church in town where her husband, Kevin, is on the board of deacons. She grew up in a denomination that didn't do adult baptism and her husband's doesn't either. She has conviction on this and wants to be baptized. She knows that your building has a baptistery . She has said to you, "I can't really officially join Kevin's church because I have conviction about being immersed. I certainly am not ready to join your church but I know that you do baptism in the Bible way. Will you baptize me?"

O.K. Pastor. Did the Seminary prepare you for this? Who of these will you baptize and who won't you... and why?

**CLOSEOUT THOUGHTS:** First of all, if this seems a bit unnecessary or mute it may be because your sense of what baptism entails isn't the same as what other people believe to be the issues of the command of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20.

Secondly, if you think these are just hypothetical I can assure you that I can give you the real name of each of these folks for they have been part of my career in ministry... and three of them were in one church!

Lastly, I know what I did back then in each of these cases. I honestly am not sure that I'd do the same thing today... and that doesn't bother me.