



# THE CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION

## UNDERSTANDING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

### WHY MEMBERSHIP?

The practice of church membership is derived from Scripture, and particularly from those biblical themes pertaining to the commitments and responsibilities of believers within the larger body of Christ. The Bible speaks of membership in the body in two different ways. First, there is membership in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. This membership is an instantaneous reality at conversion, as Paul teaches that those who are in Christ are, in fact, members of one another (Romans 12:5). Second, the Scriptures also envision the more immediate context of the local church. This closer horizon provides a context in which, under the oversight of duly appointed leadership, Christians live out the “one anothers” of Scripture. There are many such “one another” passages, particularly in the New Testament (e.g., Romans 12:16, “Live in harmony with *one another*.” 1 Thessalonians 5:11, “Encourage *one another* and build *one another* up, just as you are doing.” Galatians 6:2, “Bear *one another’s* burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”), and the majority of them require a local church context for their fulfillment.

Sometimes it is argued that believers can be part of the universal church of Christ without being united to a local, organized, visible church. Yet this is inconsistent with the practice and experience of the first followers of Jesus. In the earliest days of the church, baptized followers of Jesus were grafted into a local body of believers. Historical evidence, as well as the uniform testimony of Scripture, shows that these churches were thoroughly organized and visible, such that participants were manifestly aware of who the members of their particular body were, who held particular responsibilities, and so on.

Cyprian, one of the earliest bishops and martyrs in the African church, wrote around 250 AD, “No one can have God as father who does not have the church as mother.” (Several biblical passages speak in this way, notably Galatians 4:26–27, echoing Isaiah 54:1.) This is merely a statement of the obvious: thoroughgoing discipleship in Christ cannot occur outside of the context of a local body to whom one is committed and responsible. “It is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself” (N. T. Wright).

Our system of membership is intended to affirm and emphasize this important, biblical teaching in our highly individualistic culture where it gets naturally downplayed or overlooked. We live in a fragmented world that tends to isolate us from one another, thus membership in a local church is counter-cultural. Instead of isolation, local church members should experience interconnectedness, mutual dependence, and communal life in the new society of the body of Christ. In fact, an emphasis on church membership speaks prophetically to the practices of church shopping and church hopping that are so prevalent today. Calling people to meaningful membership fights against the anonymity that ultimately inhibits growth as a disciple of Jesus.

In light of these things, it may be helpful to think of membership in the local church as a means to the end of mature Christian discipleship. The membership system at our church is a means for commitment to growth in Christ with a particular group of Christians. It provides an environment for living out the “one anothers” and other responsibilities given to believers as family. Unlike many modern conceptions of membership with which we are familiar, membership is just as much about what we give as it is about what we receive. There are benefits and privileges to being in the body of Christ just as there are responsibilities and commitments. We hope and pray that our methods with regard to church membership foster deeper discipleship, develop stronger community, and thereby strengthen the witness of the church in the world.

Membership in our local church is not meant in any way to undermine the broader unity of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church nor is it meant to exclude, from our worship or life together, any brothers and sisters in Christ among us who are simply passing through Harrisonburg or those who are investigating the church. We intend to remain an open and welcoming community, and, while we are committed to one another in a special way as a local body, we also remain committed and responsible to all other believers in our city, region, and world.

### **HOW DO WE MAKE MEMBERSHIP MEANINGFUL?**

Meaningful membership requires substantial effort on the part of leaders and members in a congregation. It is much easier to implement a membership system that is minimalist but the values for discipleship of such a system will be limited as well and, in the end, this kind of system may prove spiritually harmful.

We ask all members to recommit themselves as members annually by signing our Membership Affirmation which is the charter for this community and becomes the focal point for our communal life together.

### **WHAT CAN MEMBERS DO THAT NON-MEMBERS CANNOT DO?**

Most obviously, members have a vote at our members meetings. However, because membership entails a certain level of commitment to the local body, positions of leadership in this body should be reserved for members. Non-members can participate in small groups and serve on committees and teams, however non-members generally will not be leading ministries of the church.

As a general rule, the baptism of adults is reserved for those who are becoming members of the church. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of spiritual new birth, and “they that receive Baptism are rightly grafted into the Church.” As we have seen, being grafted “into the Church” universal entails being connected to a local, visible, organized church. Therefore we normally require all adults that we baptize to be candidates for membership in our church. The baptism of infants and children in our church is limited to the children of members only, because of the promises that are being made on behalf of the child by both the parents and the other members of the congregation.

### **SHOULD NON-MEMBERS RECEIVE GODLY ADMONITION?**

Clearly membership entails inviting the community and its leaders into one’s life, but what about non-members who regularly worship with us and share in our community? While these brothers

and sisters in Christ are not “officially” part of our particular, local family, they are indeed part of God’s family, of which our local family is one part, and should therefore not be excluded from the grace of godly admonition. The confusion in our culture over the issues of church membership further necessitates this open and inclusive stance. We all have to operate with the same love, care, and responsibility to all those who come to and participate in the life of this church, member or non-member. This includes the exercise of godly admonition.

### **HOW DO WE REGULARLY REAFFIRM OUR COMMITMENT?**

In our small groups, usually in November, before we hold our Annual Celebration, we will give all members the opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to one another. This regular reminder of the commitments we have made to one another will help us avoid drifting into meaningless membership.

### **HOW DO PEOPLE CEASE BEING MEMBERS?**

People regularly move away, people change churches, and some people simply quit coming to church for whatever reason. It’s important that we have a way to remove these people from our membership so that our membership rolls reflect the reality of our situation. This helps our continued witness in the city as we are able to continue to be involved in the lives of our members, preventing us from claiming those with whom we no longer relate and preventing them from claiming us and so, possibly, maligning our witness and providing them false spiritual security. One mechanism we use for this is to require that each member annually sign their Membership Affirmation. This will generally eliminate from membership all those who no longer remain part of the common life of our congregation.

In addition, those who have been called to repentance formerly by the Presbyters on at least two occasions, at least one of which would be before the church, and who fail to address the matter shall cease to be members of the church. Paul is clear in 1 Corinthians 5 that the man who bears the name of brother and is found in persistent, unrepentant sin is not to be associated with (1 Corinthians 5:11). Further, in Matthew 18, the unrepentant brother is to be considered as a Gentile and a tax collector. That is, he is not to be considered a part of the church. In short, unrepentant sin can lead one to lose his or her membership in the local church.

### **CAN SOMEONE BE A MEMBER OF TWO LOCAL CHURCHES AT THE SAME TIME?**

Generally, the answer to this question is no. However, in situations where people have jobs that keep them regularly in two locations, dual membership could be an understandable reality. So long as dual membership does not enable a person to avoid the biblical responsibilities of the “one anothers” and “togethers” of Scripture, then dual membership, in certain cases, could be acceptable.