

Church Membership – Becoming part of True Way Presbyterian Church – English Congregation

The Bible teaches us that when someone puts his faith in Jesus, he is forgiven by God and reconciled with God. Out of God's grace, God brings the person into a loving relationship with Him, and gives him a new identity – as one belonging to God's family as well as being a member of Christ's body, also known as the church which Christ instituted.

Our membership in the body of Christ has two dimensions: i) when we become Christians, we are members of the spiritual body of Christ which is the universal church; ii) we are also members of the local community of believers, whose leaders are given the authority by Christ to govern and to ensure the proper functioning of the church. In the New Testament, a person would be baptised immediately or shortly after his conversion. Once he was baptised, he would naturally belong to the local church who witnessed his baptism. This would explain why there isn't any explicit commandment for Christians to become members of a church – it was a given! This corporate identity as God's people is often assumed by Christians committed to following Jesus.

It is our conviction that church membership is not a man-derived idea but an integral aspect of Christian life that cannot be separated from core Christian beliefs. In our present day there are two ways to becoming a member. The first is of course baptism; the second is through transfer of membership when one has already been baptised in another church. There are enough biblical, theological and pastoral reasons in support of church membership. When a Christian becomes a formal member of the church, he will experience God's grace in an even deeper manner as God does a transforming work in his life.

1. *Biblical reasons*

- 1 Timothy 5:9, *"let a widow be enrolled"* shows that the New Testament churches kept lists of people, such as the lists of widows. "Enrolled" means "taken into the number" or "put on the list".
- In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus outlined a process of disciplining a brother who had sinned: *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.** And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*

Here, the process assumes that there is a definable group who constitutes the church and that the members within this group have a weighty responsibility of holding each other accountable. It's hard to believe that anyone who just turns up for worship could be part of this group.

- In 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, Paul had to instruct the Corinthian church to put someone out of the church because of sexual immorality: *"What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.'*" Paul's instruction seems to suggest that an official group of persons exists, from whom someone from inside the church may be removed because of sexual immorality.

- In Acts 9:26, Saul desired to *join* himself to the church at Jerusalem. The word translated “join” is the Greek “*kollao*”. This word is defined as “to glue or cement together, then, generally, to unite, to join firmly”. This is the word Jesus used when describing the relationship and proximity of husband and wife (Matthew 19: 5). Just as the commitment between husband and wife is a formal one, so is the commitment between the individual and the local church.

2. *Theological reasons*

- When we express our commitment to Christ through baptism, we are at the same time pledging our commitment to Christ’s body, His Church, both universal and local. Becoming a member of a local church is an expression of the commitment that we formally make to the community that we are joining. Thus, baptism and membership are tied together. When there is a transfer of membership, those making the transfer are renewing their commitment to Christ even as they pledge to be committed to the new community they are transferring to.
- There are many “one another” commands in the Bible which we are exhorted to apply to our Christian living, e.g. “*love one another*” (John 13:34), “*forgive each other*” (Ephesians 4:32), “*bear with one another*” (Colossians 3:13), etc. When we become a member of a church, we are making a covenant with other members in the local church these ‘one another’ commands. We are covenanting to build each other up, using our spiritual gifts to serve one another, stirring one another to love and good works, speaking truths into each other’s lives so that we can spur each other to remain holy and pure. Making an explicit commitment through membership provides the security for such relationships to flourish. Membership is foundational to authentic relationships.
- The metaphor of a body also reinforces the “one another” principle. As members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31), we are very much dependent on each other for the health of the whole body. “*If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together*” (v26). The original meaning of the word “member” is indeed member of a body, like the foot, hand, ear and eye. In the context of a local church, “there is something unnatural about a Christian attaching himself to a body of believers and not being a member of the body” (John Piper).

3. *Pastoral reasons*

- Unless a Christian is a member of a local church, there is no practical way for him to demonstrate submission to church leaders (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). Likewise, leaders can demonstrate obedience to the command of shepherding their flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3) and giving an account for them (Hebrews 13:17) when there is a designated flock for them to shepherd.

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

(Hebrews 13:17)

- Who is this designated flock? As a member of the Registry of Society, the local church is required by the law of the land to keep a nominal roll of her members with rights and responsibilities properly outlined in her Constitution. These members will comprise the designated flock because they have taken their pledges of commitment to the local church at their baptism/transfer and in the eyes of the government they are part of that local church. As leaders, we will have to account for them before God and before the authorities respectively.
- The one who has been baptised in his former church is part of the designated flock of that church yet he is not able to fulfill his baptismal vows to his church if he has already moved on to another community. How then are the leaders of his former church able to account for him?
- Therefore, those who have chosen to worship regularly in True Way and to sit under the teaching of the church leaders should heed the exhortation to officially become members of the church.
- It is good for those who are hesitant or unconvinced about this recommendation to prayerfully consider what the Bible teaches concerning this matter.

Commitment of members

1. Membership in a church is unlike membership in other organisations. Attending church is not like attending a meeting of a social club. In the latter, members are often consumers and the organisation exists to serve them. The Church is completely different—membership means *ministry and service*, going from being a consumer and spectator to becoming a channel of God’s love and care to others, encouraging and building each other up in the faith.
2. Commitment is foundational for any community to thrive. Commitment to Jesus should also mean deep commitment to His body, the local church. Just as the early church devoted themselves to the various aspects of church life (Acts 2:42), let us do likewise.
3. As members, we should be committed to the following four areas:
 - Loving one another deeply and sacrificially (the possibilities have no end)
 - Assembling regularly with one another (for corporate worship as well as in Discipleship Groups)
 - Serving and encouraging one another (using our spiritual gifts)
 - Guarding one another (by speaking truths into each other’s lives)
4. As we grow in the above areas, we will also be growing in our discipleship and thus living out our church’s mission statement: “Love God. Make Disciples”. Discipleship therefore does involve significant and intentional commitment to the local church.
5. Members are allowed to speak and ask questions at our annual congregational meetings. They pass resolutions, vote for changes to the Constitution and By-laws, examine the annual budget, nominate and elect leaders. In addition, they themselves can serve in various leadership capacities. Those who are suitable may be elected to

serve as deacons and elders, and play a part in setting the direction of True Way and shaping her respective ministries.

Perhaps some may ask: “Can I be committed to a local church without being a member?” Our response is: “Why would you not express your commitment through your membership?” What is holding you back? Do you have a biblical reason for resisting membership in light of clear evidence from Scripture to act otherwise?

“By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We increase others' expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve us in love and to encourage us in our discipleship.” (Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*)

Commitment of church leaders

Just as we are calling our members to commitment, the pastors, elders and deacons are also committed:

1. To pray for our members. We pray for a portion of the members once every month when we meet for dawn prayer. Every member of the church will be prayed for on a rotating basis over the course of time.
2. To extend pastoral counselling to members, conduct visitations and church ceremonies such as marriage and funeral, as well as infant baptism for their children.
3. To provide financial support or subsidies on a need basis to members.
4. To embrace and involve members in the life and ministry of the church so that they can grow in their faith in and love for Jesus.
5. To exercise oversight of members' soul as those who will have to give an account before God.

The Bible teaches that the life in Christ is expressed through a deep, unreserved and life-giving commitment to a local congregation. This commitment is expressed in church membership. By becoming a committed member of Christ's body, within a local church, Christians “*grow up in every way into Him who is the head*” (Ephesians 4:15).

“Are you an accountable member of a local church? Not just: Is your name somewhere? But, are you committed to discipline and being disciplined according to biblical standards? Have you publicly declared your willingness to be shepherded and to be led by the leaders of a local church? Do you see yourself and your gifts as part of an organic ministering body? Do you show by your firm attachment to Christ's body that you are attached to Christ? Church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realise, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's [grace] to us. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing.” (John Piper)